

Chaos Bleeds by Fang Friendly

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Summary: Veronica just wanted a normal life. But being raised by the Watchers Council and becoming a full Slayer at age 11 doesn't bode well for her wishes. Things get stranger when she falls through a portal and lands in the 1980s. She quickly realizes that this world is very different from her own, but just because there aren't vampires around doesn't mean she'll get her hope for normal.

1. Chapter 1

This is a Disclaimer: This is a Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Stranger Things crossover fanfiction. I do not own any of the Characters or recognizable plot points in either of these two Master Pieces. Buffy belongs to Joss Whendon, Mutant Enemy and Dark Horse Comics and whoever else actually owns the rights to the show, comics and novels. Stranger Things belongs to the Duffer Brothers and Netflix and whoever else is involved. I only own Veronica.

Spoilers:

Buffy- The whole series, specifically Season 7, and the Twilight arc of the Season 8 comics.

Stranger Things- As of right now only Season 1 but it will eventually expand into the whole series.

Authors note: The main character in this fic will be an OC from the Buffy universe, there will be many flashbacks and allusions to Buffy Characters and my OC's interactions with them, but little to no actual Buffyverse Characters actively in the main plot.

Authors note 2: This is my first ever fanfiction. As a first time writer I'm interested in feedback. But please be gentle. It's just an idea that popped into my head the night before and wouldn't leave.

Chapter 1:

Cleveland Ohio, 2006

Veronica Hernandez was staring into the mouth of Hell. And Hell stared right back in defiance letting loose a miasma of ash and death from its depths. The ground beneath her feet trembled, the fissure cracked open further and roars could be heard from inside closer to the surface than before. They were coming.

The Apocalypse was upon them. This wasn't the first one Veronica had ever experienced or fought in. She was there for the showdown with The First, and sure she was only eleven when it all went down

but she'd still managed to kill more Turok-Han vamps than Xander and Dawn combined. She had helped stop several more apocalypses along the way, it's a slow year in Cleveland if you don't have at least two potential apocalypses on the Hellmouth. The point was, this wasn't Veronica's first rodeo but it sure felt like it might be her last.

As a Slayer she was used to the weird rushes that came with battle. A flood of adrenaline and energy that flowed through her veins as well as the contradicting calm that settled over her body. Her body, her reflexes, her mind all honed in on the battle about to begin. She stood poised and ready for the fight.

But as a Witch, which she was way before she was even called as a Slayer, she was more in tune with the metaphysical energy around her. And something deep in her gut, in the very core of who she was: mind, magic and soul knew that this was the end.

She'd never see any of these people again. Andrew, her best friend and brother figure. Dawn, another close friend and often a babysitter. Xander, her other brother all the way in Sunnydale facing the Big Bad along with the other Scoobies she'd never see again either. And Faith, who was an unlikely mother figure to her, who stood but a few feet away palming two wicked looking battle axes.

"You ready to kick some demon ass, lil' V?" Faith's raspy voice sent a shiver down Veronica's spine.

Veronica tightened her grasp on her own weapon, a battle axe similar to the Slayer Scythe design, three foot long staff with two handles and a red and silver curved blade on each end. It was a 14th birthday present from Faith, one that received a lot of disapproval from the Scoobies but quite a bit of awe from Andrew who wanted something similar for a DnD cosplay. The gift she'd received for her 13th birthday, a curved knife given to Faith by a Big Bad a few years back, was strapped to her leg and tucked into her Doc Martens.

Veronica looked to her left, met Faith's probing stare and gulped. "I'm five by five." Her voice wavered, and her following smile wobbled as she tried not to cry. She looked back toward the opening Hellmouth. Her spidey-sense was going off like crazy. It was almost time to fight. Any second now and the Demons would ascend through the bowels

of Hell.

She could feel the older Slayer's eyes burning into her skull. "Hey Faith?" Her eyes began to water and she blinked back the tears before they could fall.

"I just wanted to say thank you. For being there for me, and training me, and educating me on the finer side of wicked music and fashion. And rescuing me from Andrew and Xander induced nerdiness. And taking care of me. And just for giving a fuck." Veronica whipped her head around to stare at her mentor. "I know you have this whole lone wolf thing going on, dark and mysterious and shit. But you let me in. I can see that. You've told me things, showed me sides of yourself that you haven't shown Buffy, or Giles or Robin, maybe even Angel. And I just want to thank you for that. Because I am pretty sure I'm going to die today. And I just wanted to let you know that you're the best thing to ever happen to me. And that I love you like a Mom."

"What the fuck V?!" Faith spit out at her. She dropped her hands from her fighting stance and turned toward the mini slayer. Her eyes were wide and panicked. "Don't say shit like that! You ain't dying today. Not on my watch. You need to get your head in the game, this is just another apocalypse, lower case 'A'. Just one of many. We slay, we win and they lose. I do a little H'n'H, you do your one H and it's all five by five. And then we face the next one in a few months." She stepped up to Veronica and dropped a single battle axe, and used the free hand to grab the girl by the back of the neck. She pulled the girl into a semi embrace, Veronica's head tucked into the curve of her neck and their bodies angled away from each other due to the weapons they both held.

"You don't understand, Faith." She shook her head, trying to pull away to look the other Slayer in the eyes. Faith held her close and didn't let her move. Veronica gave up and took a breath. "It's my Slayer senses, it's like a Slayer dream but I'm awake. I just know. I won't be here after the battle, whether we win or lose, I won't be here to see the outcome."

Faith's grip on her tightened and her body tensed. "Well then we send you away. Willow-

"Is in Sunnydale with the main squad. She's the only one with enough power to do the whole portal thingy."

Faith pulled on the hair at the base of Veronica's skull, forcing her head up to meet her stare. Faith's eyes were dark, and her jaw was clenched. "Then you get your ass out of here."

"How, the Hellmouth's about to unleash its worst on us, how am I supposed to outrun that?"

Faith let go of the young girl. Sneering as she bent down to pick up her forgotten axe. "Drive!"

"Like that's going to work! And I'm only fourteen! I don't know how to drive."

"Well why the fuck not?! I stole my first car when I was twelve, how have I not taught you that yet?" She raised her axe to emphasize her anger. "Grrrrr," she growled to herself. "Your not dying tonight kid! There's no way I'm allowing that to happen. Fuck your Slayer sense, and fuck the Powers that be. I'm not losing you twerp. So shut up and grow some tits, cuz it's about to go down."

The ground began to really shake beneath their feet, cracks broke out in every direction from the Hellmouth, pieces of earth crumbled off and fell into the cavern, and a giant tentacle shot into the air and slammed down a few yards away from them. A few Minis jumped out of the way, as boney spines suddenly extended from the slimy flesh of the demon limb.

"V, you follow me! Alright? Stick to me."

And then Hell ascended upon them.

It was a blur of battle. Turok-Han ubervamps crawled out amongst the other larger demons from the pits of whatever Hell dimension they crawled out of. It was intense. Blood, and dust and slime was everywhere. Veronica had beheaded several demons and hemisected an ubervamp from nose to navel before it fell to dust. She was fighting back to back with Faith when the giant tentacle struck again. They both dove in opposite directions as the tentacle created a wall

between them.

"Veronica!" Faith jumped at the huge limb. She slashed her axes across the spines protruding from the monster. They broke off as she hacked away at it. The thing writhed around after she sliced into its flesh instead of the claws, black slime splattering across the floor and her clothes. The Demon's blood sizzled as it met her clothes, burning holes in her shirt and singeing her hair as she backed away. "V?!"

Veronica herself was dealing with two Turok-Han on either side of her. She could hear Faith's cry of her name, her full name, which she never used. She didn't let that distract her though. She was a little too busy at the moment. She swung at one vamp with a circular swing of her scythe and let the motion continue to slice into the demon at her back. She was doing an alright job at keeping them at bay, but she knew she couldn't kill one without leaving herself open for a fatal attack from the other. They circled her, always making sure to stay on opposite sides of her never too close to each other to make it harder on her.

"Fuck this shit." Veronica suddenly charged at one, planting her axe into the ground and using it to help vault herself into the air and behind one of the vamps. She quickly beheaded the vamp and readied herself as the dust cloud cleared. She looked at her remaining enemy only to see another cloud of dust settle to reveal that Dawn had dusted the other vamp.

"Need a hand?" The older girl quipped as she came to stand next to the mini Slayer.

"Thanks," Veronica's eyes flashed a golden yellow as she waved a hand in a slicing motion diagonally in front of herself. Her magic slicing through the torso of some kind of green skinned demon that came up behind Dawn. "But you should really watch your own back."

Dawn swiveled around to see the demon behind her fall in two. She whipped back around to give the young Witch-Slayer a half smile. "I totally had that one."

"Mmhm." They moved so that they were back to back as a second wave of demons erupted from the Hellmouth. They talked as they

fought. "You know, I'm totally glad you guys insisted that I take up Gymnastics! You know, or else I'd have totally been dead by now."

"I'll make sure to let Buffy know, she's planning to make it a requirement for all new Slayers."

"V?!" Faith's shout could be heard from the other side of the huge Demon Tentacle.

Veronica dusted a vamp and wiped away the blood and sweat that had started to drip into her eyes. The vamp had got her good, a claw slicing into her scalp before she had the chance to perry it away. "Five by Five on this end!" She shouted back across the writhing monster.

Dawn quickly let Faith know that Veronica wasn't on her own. "I got her Faith. We're totally kicking ass on our side." And she wasn't wrong, the army of slayers were indeed making a dent in the demonic army they faced. It actually seemed like they were going to win this time, they just needed Buffy and Spike to do whatever it was they needed to do down in Sunnydale.

"Good! You stick with her, D. I can't get over this ugly giant worm, and try not to hack into it, its blood is acid." There were sounds of grunting and fighting on both sides before Faith spoke again. "And Veronica?" She paused, "I'll see you later."

Veronica understood the words for what they really were. A promise. She smiled as she dodged a punch from a demon. "I'll see you later, Faith." And then she and Dawn ran off towards a group of slayers fighting behind some overturned cars. The earth shook and the Hellmouth opened up further, about five more giant tentacles shot out of the ground, collapsing the ground near the source from which they came. They all slammed down into the earth, destroying everything in their path. A small building came crashing down around one, cars were crushed underneath another and a few unfortunate Minis that were too slow were lost beneath a couple of the giant tentacles. The tentacles burrowed into the ground, and whatever was attached to them began to use its limbs to help lift itself out of the Hellmouth.

"Run!" Veronica yelled toward the teams closest to the edges of the Hellmouth. Veronica wasn't sure if they had heard her or not, or if they'd figured it out themselves but they all fled from the Mouth of Hell as the ground beneath them crumbled away and the largest demon she'd ever seen in her life, crawled out into the open. It was all writhing limbs and pincers like some kind of giant walking octopus and crab orgy. It roared as it made it onto land, and slayers and witches were crushed beneath its mass.

"Dear gods." The giant monster was only the beginning. It seemed as though the beast had been blocking off most of the Hellmouth with its mass, and now that it was no longer blocking the opening, the real army made its way to the surface, hundreds of more demons climbed out all at once.

They were fucked.

And just when Veronica was about to open her mouth to state so, Dawn and the other slayers quickly ran passed her toward the giant monster and the giant whole in the ground.

"I'm definitely dying today." Veronica ran to catch up to them, slicing and dicing as she did so.

There were so many fucking vampires, like fucking rats pouring out into the open. Veronica stopped and dropped her axe, holding out her hands instead and focused on chanting a spell Willow had taught her. Dawn and a few others circled back to protect her as they realized what she was going to do. The others formed a loose circle around her fighting off demons as they came near.

Veronica chanted and she could feel the power flow through her as she did so. She couldn't see it herself but she knew that her magic was swirling around her, almost physical in its potency. Her hair whipped around by a nonexistent wind that was her magic, and her eyes glowed gold and she hovered off the ground a good four inches. And when she built up enough power and reached the end of the spell she shot her hands out in front of her and swept them around and sunlight escaped her palms, incinerating the vamps in their wake. Dawn could see that several other teams had followed Veronica's lead, surrounding there designated witches and letting

them work their mojo.

The slayers cheered as the enemy's army thinned. And they swept outward taking out the demons unaffected by the beams of light. Dawn stayed by her side, laying a bloody hand across the girl's shoulder, unknowingly lending the young Slaywitch power and magic that only fueled the girl's spell.

The ground beneath them shook again, and the floor began to give way, though they were quite a ways away from the Hellmouth opening Dawn began to tug the girl away, as the hole expanded. Veronica stopped chanting, though her eyes still glowed. She picked up her Scythe and ran with Dawn but they were too slow.

The ground began to crumble beneath their feet and though the earth stopped shaking and they kept running, it was too late. They could see a large crack in the ground a few yards ahead of them, that marked their finish line. Veronica could feel that this was the end. So she took hold of Dawn's arm and swung her forward tossing the older woman just far enough to where she rolled across that crack that signified their death with a few feet to spare.

Dawn was safe, she knew that now. But that didn't mean that she was going to just let herself die that easily. The earth beneath her caved in, she ran up the inclined slab of concrete as it began to tip into the open abyss of the Hellmouth and jumped for the sturdy earth a few yards away.

She wasn't going to make it. There was no way she was going to make it. But she made a promise to Faith and she was going to try her hardest to keep it. As she fell she held her scythe with two hands and swept it down with all her strength, hoping to anchor herself to solid land.

The scythe struck land and she cried out as she held onto the handle of her blade. Her weight pulled her down, snapping her arms out and slicing her palm against the secondary blade of her weapon as she tried to find a sturdy position to hold onto.

"Veronica!?" Dawn popped her head over the rim of the Hellmouth. Veronica was sure that the sight wasn't pretty from her point of view.

Veronica was sure that demons were scaling up the sides of the cavern as she held on for dear life. If she could somehow hold on to the Scythe indefinitely she would still be killed by the hordes of demons trying to escape the Hellmouth.

"Lil' V!" Veronica could hear Faith in the distance.

Dawn tried to lean over to reach the young girl. The part of the blade from Veronica's scythe that wasn't embedded into the ground dug into her sternum as she did so, but she only pushed further. Blood dripped from her hand and onto Veronica's face. "Faith, over here! Help. Please, Faith."

"There's no use Dawn." Veronica, had accepted that she was going to die, but she didn't want to bring anyone down with her. "Just go, let me go."

"No! Shut up and just give me your hand." Blood continued to drip across the girl beneath her as she flailed her arm about trying to get as close to Veronica as possible.

"No. I'm too far. And even if I could reach, then I'd just take you down with me."

"Stop that! Shut up and just take my fucking hand!" Dawn grunted in frustration. They could both hear Faith's yelling getting closer, but they knew that by the time she'd reach them it would definitely be too late. Dawn began to cry, "use your fucking powers or something, come on! No!"

Veronica blinked her eyes, she tried to build up her energy but it was all gone. She'd spent most of her energy on the Sun Spell. There was nothing left to help her. Her eyes changed color, from her light brown to a pale translucent yellow. Usually they'd glow gold with her power, now they were dead, just hollow.

Blood from her earlier head wound began to leak into her eyes, Dawn's blood dripped across the girl's face, and into her open wounds.

"Just grab my hand, you made Faith a promise." Veronica knew it

was useless but she did indeed make that promise. So she steeled herself and reached for Dawn's hand. Their bloody fingers touched.

"Veronica?!" It was Faith she was here.

Veronica jumped and so did Faith. Faith had jumped toward the girls. Wrapping her arms around Dawn's waist as she and Veronica were about to tip over into the Hellmouth. Veronica's hand reached for Dawn's and this time they connected. Her other hand shot out to hold on to Dawn's arm for support.

But both of them were bloody and their mixed blood made them slick.

Veronica slipped.

All three girls screamed.

Veronica fell backwards into the mouth of Hell.

But her eyes flickered gold as she did so.

As she fell towards the waiting hands of demons, a glowing green portal opened up beneath her. Swallowing her whole.

—

Dawn almost tipped over into the Hellmouth, but Faith pulled her back onto solid ground. They rolled onto their backs a few feet away from the crater.

"Dawnie?" Dawn looked over at Faith with a smile. "Let's not do that again." Faith let out a throaty chuckle. She picked herself up with ease, rolled her neck and stretched her arms.

"Hey what's that?" Dawn still on the floor pointed to a shiny red something sticking out of the ground near the edge of the Hellmouth.

Faith peered over and saw a red handle in the ground, she wrapped her hand around it despite the blood that covered the once shiny red metal. She pulled and the most wicked looking weapon she'd ever seen came loose.

"Woah!" Dawn stood now and leaned over to get a better view of the weapon. "That looks like the Slayer Scythe." She made to reach for it but something in Faith tensed at the action. She swept the weapon out of the younger girl's reach.

Dawn pouted at her but Faith ignored it. The thing did look like the Slayer Scythe. The axe heads were a perfect replica of the ones on the mystical weapon, but there was no stake at the end of the handle, instead another blade mounted on the opposite side of the staff. There was also an interesting grip in the center, the bevels looked like the one on the end of the stake, her hand fit perfectly on the grip.

She held it out in one hand, gripped at the center. It was perfectly balanced. She swung it around a few times and used it to behead a demon. It worked like a charm. The scythe didn't hum with magic and Slayer essence like the Slayer Scythe did but it felt *right* in her hands.

"I wonder where it came from?" Dawn peered at it after dusting a vamp.

"Well I don't know where it came from, or who it belonged to but it's mine now." She gave the younger girl a wide smile before diving back into the fray of battle.

Mine.

Sunnydale California, 2006

Buffy Summers swung her Slayer Scythe into the Seed of Wonder.

And magic was destroyed.

Cleveland Ohio

Veronica woke up in the middle of a field. The sun was in her eyes, and a piece of wheat was tickling her nose. This was weird because

she should be dead, not that she was complaining about being alive. She just didn't expect to be waking up at all, let alone by herself in an open field.

She sat up, fighting off a wave of dizziness as she did so. She was covered in dirt and blood and vampire dust and grass. The blood on her clothes was dry and just looked like mud at this point. *Ugh, this was her favorite shirt.*

"Where am I?" She asked herself. She stood up and began to dust herself off. She didn't expect an answer but she got one anyway.

"Cleveland," came a voice of a little boy. Veronica whipped around to find a small boy about 6 years old, standing behind her.

"What!?" Her hands flew to her chest, feeling the rise of her pulse beneath her fingertips.

"You're in Cleveland." The little boy said again.

"Yeah I know, I heard you just scared the sh-um," she cleared her throat to cover up her slip of the tongue. "You just scared me, kid."

"Oh." The boy just blinked at her. He was starting to creep her out.

"Hey kid," she looked around to see if there was anyone else around, maybe the kids parents. She had to make her way back to the Hellmouth and see what was going on. If she was still in Cleveland like the little guy said then she should be able to see or hear the fight still going on. The battle was a night time one and the sun was shining bright so the battle must be over if the world was still standing the following day. They won!

Oh thank the Powers!

"What day is it?" The question slipped out when she noticed he was looking at her questioningly.

"Tuesday." The kid was looking at her like she was stupid.

"What?! You mean Wednesday, right?" Yesterday was Tuesday, Apocalypses always start on a Tuesday.

"No it's Tuesday. Yesterday was Monday, because that was the first day back at school, the day before that was Sunday because mom made me put on a stupid tie to go to church, and-" The kid was just going to continue, so she cut him off real quick.

"Okay, kid. You're *really* sure it's Tuesday. I get it." She looked around and spotted a truck a ways down the road. "Is that your parent's car?"

"Mhmm"

Veronica quickly started to jog over to the vehicle pulled up along the side of the road, with its hood popped up. The boy followed.

"Uh, kid, does your mom have a phone with her?"

"My mom's at home. We have one at our house. But that's back that way," he pointed out back toward where they were earlier. "And don't call me kid! Your barely older than me!"

Veronica slowed down as they neared the truck, rolling her eyes at the boys words. "God who doesn't have a cellphone now a days? What is this the seventies?"

"No, its-" Veronica heard his words and stopped as she reached the passenger door.

She moved to lean against the car door and noticed that she had to reach up to grab onto the open window sill. And that when she did palm the door frame that her hand was tiny, like *tiny* tiny.

She looked down and noticed her shoes looked so big on her little skinny legs, and how *flat* her chest was.

Oh shit.

Veronica rounded the front of the car and came face to face with a man in his thirties with a full on mullet.

She turned her head and looked into the gleaming metal of the trucks grill, and her ten year old face stared back at her.

"*Motherfucker.*"

Cleveland Ohio, 1980

Veronica Hernandez fainted. And smacked the back of her head against the concrete.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2:

Ohio, September 21, 1980

Veronica had been in the year 1980 for all of five days and she had already lost all hope that she would make it back home. She was almost thirty years in the past. Every person she would have turned to in a magic mixup wasn't even born yet, or they were on a different continent.

If they even existed anymore.

Veronica was *pretty* sure that she was actually in an alternate reality, or universe, or dimension of some kind. She wasn't really sure what the difference between all of those terms were, but she did know that there were differences. She vaguely remembered Andrew giving her a lecture on something similar once, there was a mention of cheese and shrimp, but she really just blocked out the whole thing. She was good with nerdiness, but only when it came to pop culture. Movies and games were her things, quantum physics and what not was a bit above her pay grade.

The reason she was so sure that she wasn't in *her* reality was that there seemed to be no magic.

—

Cleveland Ohio, September 17th, 1980

Veronica had woken up from her embarrassing fainting episode as she was being placed onto a gurney in a hospital emergency room. Lights buzzed above her head, those long fluorescent ones that you can always hear buzz and flicker. There were so many voices as several adults talked above her head, and one small voice chattered at her from somewhere near her waist. Apparently the little boy from the field turned out to be one Aaron Myers, age six *and a half* (the half was *very* important). He and his father Allen had settled her into the back of their cab and drove her to the nearest hospital.

Aaron Myers was a little off on his first words to her. She did not wake up in Cleveland but in a field just between the city and Akron, in front of the Richfield Coliseum which she'd never before heard of. But she assumed it was about the same area where the Hellmouth would have existed in her reality. She'd gathered that info from the people talking above her.

She was glad she had woken when she did. Hospitals had the tendency to cut first and ask questions later. All she had were the clothes on her back and the stuff she had stashed in her shoes. Sure the shirt was about four sizes too big and her pants were only held in place by a belt, and yeah they were covered in demon guts but they were all she had and she wasn't about to let some quacks cut them off her to get to a wound that was probably halfway healed by now anyway.

She couldn't afford to lose anything that she had, and she didn't think they'd have reacted too well to finding the knife she had hidden under her pant leg, or the iPod she had tucked into a pocket she had sewn into the lining of her boots. She also probably still had a few bills tucked in there somewhere too.

Has money changed since the 80s? Would someone think her bills were fake?

Veronica had tried to make a break for it, it wasn't like the public had been too friendly with Slayers in the- *her* recent past. The whole Twilight and Anti-Slayer bullshit really put a dent on her already almost nonexistent people skills. But she was still physically tired from the battle. She could tell that her surface wounds had mostly healed up, the one on her head might still have been open, but at least it had stopped bleeding. It was the internal things that slowed her escape. Her ribs hurt, now that she had focused on taking in her injuries, they might have been cracked from a few blows she'd taken in her three-way standstill.

What really put a damper on her jailbreak, and what she would never admit to anyone, was the shoes. Veronica had hopped off the gurney as they were wheeling her past a waiting room and made it all of ten feet before she tripped. Her shoes were now like three sizes too big so she tripped over a raised trim from where the carpet turned to tile.

And as she extended her arm to catch herself she had underestimated the distance between her newly smaller body and the wall and smacked down onto the cheap linoleum shoulder first.

And dislocated her arm

"Who the fuck puts carpet in a Hospital?!" She could feel the eyes of everyone in the waiting room, a few women even gasped or *tsked* at her language. The boy's father had been following the gurney and began to approach her slowly. He gave her his name and asked if he could help her sit up.

"What's your name, Sweetheart?"

Veronica was curled up on the floor, clutching at her shoulder. And the situation really sunk in at that moment. She could hear the news on the TV talking about Christians protesting in downtown Cleveland about letting some band perform at a concert hall somewhere in the city.

"They're endorsing Marijuana!"

"The single 'Another One Bites the Dust' was released earlier this year-"

Veronica was in 1980. Alone. Faith was probably only a few months old, somewhere in Boston with an alcoholic mother and an absentee father. Veronica didn't even know if Giles would be a reliable ally. He might have still been in his ol' Ripper days. Even if he *was* in fact currently all about the tweed, he was on a whole different fucking continent!

Ugh. She'd have to rely on Angel. Gross.

But being honest with herself, Veronica was willing to admit that she'd take the brooding vampire any day over having to deal with this on her own. She hadn't been on her own since Giles had retrieved her from the Devon Coven back in 2002, *or forward in 2002*. Her head hurt.

The man still had his hand extended towards her, palm up and patiently waiting for her own hand. She stared at him. Other than the unfortunate thing that was his mullet he seemed like a nice guy.

Average height, brown hair, blue eyes, and lean. He had crinkles around his eyes, and lines around his mouth that showed that he was a happy man, he smiled and laughed a lot. His son looked just like him, maybe a smaller and more rounded nose though. Aaron stood behind his father with his hand fisted in the older man's shirt.

She put her hand in the Dad's, the hand that had been clutching at her injured shoulder. She decided that she could trust these people. For now. At least until her shoulder had been properly reset.

"Veronica." She cleared her throat, it was dry. She licked her lips, soothing her chapped lips as she tried to put her words together. "My name is Veronica."

"Okay, well let's get you back on that gurney, Veronica. And no Jailbreaks this time." He gently helped her up off the floor, but her shoulder was still jostled in the process.

She walked back towards the group of nurses and doctors that she had previously ran from. She made sure to stare down the doctor who was looking at her with the most disapproval. Major eye contact was being made. Yeah, she tried to make a break for it. And? She wasn't ashamed and she always stood by her decisions. She was slightly regretting the shoulder, but she wasn't going to be cowed by some doctor that didn't know the first thing about her. He looked away first.

She so won that one.

They wheeled her into an area sectioned off by a curtain in what looked like urgent care. Maybe? Veronica didn't spend much time in hospitals she didn't really know the difference. They passed by a few open curtains: an older man hooked up to an IV; a woman and her son arguing about something or other; a teenage girl sitting in a gown alone in her little room.

They stopped at the end of the hall/room. Then they started in on the inquisition.

What is your name?

"Veronica Hernandez." She figured that the truth couldn't hurt her too much. Hernandez was a pretty common Latino name. Though after she said it, she wondered if she should have went with something else, maybe a little less ethnic. She was half Mexican and she didn't have any proof of her existence in this time. They could probably deport her if she was being honest with herself. The 80s wasn't all sunshine and big hair, racism and homophobia was a big thing back then, *now*. But it was too late to take it back.

Age?

"Ten?" It came out like a question. She honestly didn't know how old she was physically. It wasn't like she could say 14, she didn't look a day over ten. Veronica was always a small child, which was why she had to do so much extra Slayer training when she was but a wee little potential still being raised by the Council. Her body looked like she was eight, but that was just her short Hispanic genes. Her gut told her that she was ten. She nodded her head and repeated her answer. Ten felt right.

Do you know what happened to you?

"No." And she really didn't know. One minute she was falling to her death and the next she was here.

No, that wasn't right.

One minute she was falling to her death, and then she felt a rush of energy roll through her. Power flared across her skin, making the hairs on her arms stand at attention. Then she woke up in 1980. But she wasn't as strong as Willow. She didn't have the power to bend time and space to her will like the redheaded Witch. She could admit to herself that she had read some of the texts on the subject but wasn't stupid enough to try to attempt such a thing on her own. She wasn't responsible for whatever it was that brought her here, but whatever did it was powerful.

"I don't know."

And that's how the rest of the conversation went. The doctors asked a question, she said she didn't know anything and then it continued.

The Myers duo stepped out sometime during the questioning. A nurse pulled out a few items from the cabinets behind the doctors and then quickly left the room.

"We're going to need you to go ahead and change into this hospital gown. Is that okay?" Veronica nodded her head and everyone left. She hopped off the gurney and onto the floor.

Her shoulder jostled and the pain flared up, but she just grit her teeth and pushed past the pain.

She bent down to untie her shoes, and realized that it was really fucking hard to do so with only one hand. After a few attempts at undoing the knot she realized that she could just slip her foot out now that they didn't fit her anymore.

She had a hard time unstrapping the knife sheath from her leg. For some reason the holster had remained tight against her calf, it had shrunk to fit her leg. Veronica brought the sheath up to her face for a better look. The black leather was familiar under her fingers. She'd had the knife and holster for over a year. On one side of the sheath were the initials VLH branded into the fine leather. On the other side, the side that settled against her skin, was nothing.

Veronica smoothed her thumb across the leather and could feel something there. She pushed the barest amount of power into her finger tip and traced her thumb across the surface once again. A path of runes lit up in a golden light, fading as her finger moved away from each engraving and then camouflaging into the leather once again. "Protection," "durability," and "flexibility." There were a few more runes thrown in but those were the main ones. The sheath was spelled to grow to fit her and never break or damage. The magic receded back into her. She knew her eyes were also fading from the same golden glow as her magic.

She didn't know why her eyes glowed gold. She assumed it had to do with her Slayer abilities, as far as she knew there had never been a Witch called as a Slayer. The Council apparently had been in the mood to experiment when they had picked her up as a newborn. The Devon Coven seers had foreseen Veronica's birth and had been able to trace her location with the spell used to locate Potentials before

she was even born. She hadn't even made it past the second trimester yet. Apparently that was pretty rare.

Giles thought that the Devon Coven were able to sense her fetus because of the latent magic that encased her soul. Very few magic users were born with magic within themselves. Most are born with the ability to access the magic around them, or the energy given off by certain mystical or natural objects or beings. Like called to like, and the magic in her soul somehow amplified whatever pinged off on the Potential radar.

Andrew just said that the Force was strong with that one. Veronica secretly agreed.

She blinked her eyes a few times to clear any lingering brightness. She quickly stashed the knife under the mattress of the gurney. She then stripped herself down to just her socks, underwear and a sports bra, and neatly folded her pants, belt and two shirts she had been wearing into a pile by her boots.

The underwear was baggy but they were a brand new pair, so the elastic waistband actually fit across her small body just fine. She took a moment to examine her body. The first thing that she had noticed were the bruises that colored her skin. There was only one purple bruise, the rest had already begun to heal and were already in their yellowish stages. Her ribs on her right side were purple, but she didn't want to move her arm on that side and bring back the sharp pain by examining the area. She had a few cuts across her chest and a lot of knicks that littered her arms. It looked like she had a fight with a cat and lost. Blood covered her arms.

Veronica looked beyond the wounds to examine her new body. She was all boney, with knobby knees, and she could see where the bone of her arm was grotesquely sticking out near her collarbone. She was paler than she had previously been. Where her skin was once a beautiful caramel brown, she was now pasty and washed out. She looked paler than Spike. Her curly brown hair was shorter than it had been as well, by about five inches. Her hair barely brushed her shoulders now. Her dark brown, almost black, locks were tangled and had grass sticking out in most places the sight made her grimace. Her hair was the one vanity she allowed herself. It would take forever to

fix the mess that it was in.

She quickly threw on the hospital gown, and tied the thing the best she could with her injuries. She leaned over and checked for feet behind the curtain. It was empty. She figured she had a couple more minutes before someone came back in.

Veronica went to the sink in the corner of the room. Washing off the blood sounded like a good idea to her. She turned on the sink and let the water run warm while she lathered her arms in basically all the soap they had. She let the water run across her arms for a couple seconds.

The water ran a rust colored red. She began to scrub, lightly using nails to get the dried flaky spots off. She worked her way from her elbows down to her wrists. She went full on surgical scrub via Dr. Grey.

Man, that was a good show. O'Malley was so adorkable. Dawn preferred McDr-

Dawn. Whose blood was literally on her hands. Veronica began to scrub a little harder. The water went from warm to hot, but she scrubbed and scratched at her arms until the water ran red with the blood from her reopening her wounds.

A couple nurses walked passed the curtain, gossiping about one of their coworkers as they passed by.

That snapped her out of her mini breakdown.

Ugh. Veronica hated gossips. "Way to slut shame, Karen. It's not like the men should take any responsibility in the situation."

She grumbled to herself about snooty bitches as she switched the faucet to cold, rinsing of the last of the blood and began to carefully pat her arms down with a paper towel.

As she examined her now clean arms she noticed something new.

She now had a tattoo on her left wrist. "What the fuck?"

She turned her arm this way and that hoping that viewing it at different angles or a different shade of light might make it disappear. She ran her fingers over the ink. It was slightly raised, definitely scarred over and completely healed already. This thing wasn't new.

"Is this supposed to be some kind of time traveling passport? They just brand people now?!"

She could hear one of the doctors from before talking to someone as he approached. Veronica panicked. How was she supposed to explain this shit?!

She took a deep breath and concentrated on remembering the words to a certain spell. She chanted under her breath, eyes closed to hide the odd light in her eyes. She turned her back to the curtain and finished her incantation just as a fist wrapped around the curtains edge. She held her palms flat against her chest and she felt the magic flare from the center of her torso out to into every fiber in her body. Her skin rippled as the magic moved outward, concealing every bruise, cut and tattoo that littered her body. The doctors wouldn't see them, if they touched them they would feel nothing but smooth skin.

The grumpy doctor from earlier entered the makeshift room. A female nurse followed him in. They did the whole physical examination. Checked her eyes, ears, and throat. Checked her breathing. And when she mentioned her arm he raised a brow.

"You think you dislocated your arm?" The doctor asked in a skeptical tone of voice.

"Yes. I've dislocated bones before. I know what it feels like. I also got a good look at it when I was getting undressed. It's dislocated."

"It's highly unlikely. I saw your little stunt earlier. A fall like that won't do anything."

"It would if my joint had been under stress previously!"

"The pain you'd be in-"

"Oh, my Goddess!" Veronica began to fiddle with the tie at the side of her gown. She shoved the shoulder of the gown down and showed them her bare shoulder blade. The thing was definitely out of the socket. In her boney childish body the disfigurement was even more pronounced. A lump the size of her fist protruded from her collar, it was the skin stretched tight across the end of her humerus.

She watched his words die on his lips. She smirked at him. Yeah she won that round too.

"Motherfucker!"

The doctor quickly popped the bone back in place. And it hurt like a bitch. She narrowed her eyes at the slight lift at the corner of his lips. Maybe this round was a draw.

She rolled her shoulder a bit to make sure the joint was in right. It was. It just really hurt. The nurse passed her an ice pack and then they left again.

Sadistic fucking doctors.

She had a feeling that she was going to be there for a while. And she was. It felt like hours before she saw anyone besides a nurse that came in to bring her a sandwich and water. Eventually she had a lovely little chat with a few police officers. They'd asked her the usual questions, but they'd asked her a new one too.

"Where are you from? What city do you live in? Are you from the area?"

Veronica paused at that. She didn't really know what her best option would be right now. She could say Cleveland, but it wouldn't take long for them to piece together the fact that she actually didn't have any relatives in the area. They'd probably send a squad out to where the future Slayer Organization headquarters would be located, but it could be a McDonald's for all she knew. She figured the further the better as it'd take time for them to confirm any information she gave.

She opened her mouth to tell them Los Angeles, but ended up saying "Sunnydale, California" instead. LA was a big city, it was probably

easier to get a hold of then the number of the local sheriff's station in a small town like Sunnydale. It would buy her more time. "1630 Revello Drive."

Veronica took a moment to down the rest of her water. She threw back her head and chugged down the last half of her water bottle as the two officers shared a look with one another. "Right. We're going to go see what we can find. You sure you don't have a telephone number we can call, kid?" She shook her head. The two officers left, shutting the curtain behind themselves.

"Never heard of a Sunnydale before, have you?"

"Naw, it's probably one of those smaller cities up north or something. I'd have been surprised if you did. Never stepped a foot out of Ohio a day in your life!"

"Let's just take this down to the station and check in on that call to CPS. Someone should have come down by now."

The two men walked away and she was left alone once again. Veronica huffed out a breath and flopped back onto the mattress. She wondered if the others survived the battle. If the Scooby Gang back in Sunnydale got a hold of whatever would destroy Twilight's effect on their universe. She was sure that Buffy did what had to be done, the girl was the poster girl for Apocalypse ending, but everyone's luck ran out eventually. The original Slayer had escaped death twice, she was running out of chances.

Veronica was being broody. She *knew* that her side won, she just didn't know at what cost. She vividly remembered seeing a Slayer crushed to death by that ugly ass octopus thing. She knew they'd lost people on their side. She just hoped that *her* people weren't amongst the casualties.

If they survived, were they looking for her? Did time continue on while she was stuck in the past? Or did things pause until she made it back? You know, live a week in the past and pop back in where she had originally left off?

Veronica curled into herself, staring off at the patterns in the groves

of the wall. She allowed herself to continue her pity party.

At least another five minutes.

Only five.

She fell asleep in three.

—

Cleveland Ohio, September 21, 1980

Veronica thought back to when she had woken up after falling asleep at the hospital. She had woken the following morning to the whispered voices of a police officer and someone from child services.

Apparently there was no such place as Sunnydale. And that's what really woke her up.

No Sunnydale.

Sunnydale was founded in the 1800s, Wilkins and demons and whatnot. It existed. She'd been there. She'd fought there! She help destroy that sucker. There was no way it didn't exist.

It felt like a weight had settled in her stomach. There was a physical ache in her gut as she tried to avoid what a lack of Sunnydale could mean.

She needed to do some research and she needed to do that right at that moment. Which lead her to interrupting the two people outside her room to ask to use the restroom. After a round of introductions, she was allowed to go. She quickly slipped on her boots claiming cold feet, and tucked her knife into the waistband of her underwear.

She did in fact use the little girl's room. It had been about two days since she had actually used the restroom. She also took the time to try to tame the mess that was her hair. She splashed water onto her hair and tried to finger-comb out any knots. She washed her hands and let the faucet run before heading towards the door. While her escort's back was turned she slipped from the room, leaving the door locked from the inside and dashed down the hall. She quickly passed

a few rooms, dodging hospital staff as she did so, hiding behind doors and peeking around corners. It was all very James Bond.

She found the room from the day before. The mother and son, they were both gone, but food was still left out on the little tray they provided so she assumed they'd be back soon. She quickly went through a cabinet in the wall and found a clear bag with the boys belongings in them. She stole the boys jeans. They looked like they would fit. She kicked off her shoes and pulled on the pants, they did fit, almost perfectly. They were definitely too long for her so she cuffed the legs a few times. She jammed her sock clad feet back into her boots and tied them as tight as she could before she dashed back into the hallway.

She could hear banging going on down the hall. They probably noticed her lack of response from the bathroom. The teenager from yesterday was pulling on a pair of pants herself when Veronica stumbled through her curtain. She swiped up the shirt the girl had yet to pull on and dashed back out. She managed to make it outside without being noticed. She tore off her hospital gown and threw on the stolen long sleeved top. It was red. Not really her color but it would do for the moment.

She had research to do.

And research she did.

First stop? The local library. There she confirmed that there was indeed no Sunnysdale. No UC Sunnysdale, *Sunnysdale Press*, nothing. It was hard enough that the computers in the library weren't actually connected to any kind of internet source or search engine. They were really only good for typing things up.

And wasn't that a slap in the face. Veronica was used to being able to google shit like this. The only time she had to crack open book was when she had to research demons, and even then Willow had managed to upload almost everything they had onto their Online Demonology Database (Odd for short).

Veronica put on her best smile and somehow convinced the librarian that she had a project of some kind about different colleges in

California. The lady directed her towards a couple books on universities and a couple books on maps when she asked for one. She even offered Veronica a piece of candy from a jar on the counter. The Slayer got to work, she read everything she could get her hands on that had anything to do with California.

No Sunnydale.

Well alright then, maybe she was in an alternate reality where Sunnydale never existed. These things happened. She just needed to check out some sources in the area before she did anything drastic. It was late though so Veronica made a show of thanking the librarian before heading out. And then she immediately snuck right back in through a side entrance. She spent an hour or so in a janitor's closet before she was able to confirm that she was indeed alone and everyone who worked there had gone home.

She raided the desk for snacks, and found a couple of candy bars and some trail mix in a drawer by the checkout counter. Veronica also raided the lost and found. She found herself a decent looking bomber jacket, black and a men's medium but good enough. She loaded the pockets with candy the librarian had offered her earlier in the day. She drank some water from the watercooler by the desks and then settled in for the night in a chair in a secluded corner of the building.

Friday didn't seem to work in her favor either. She walked around town searching out for the supernatural hotspots. Demon bars, vampire nests, magic stores, none of them were there. It could have been possible that they just hadn't been built yet, but every single one not existing? It was a bit too coincidental.

On Saturday after waking up in the library and this time being caught, she quickly went to the last place on her list. She made her way to Cleveland's biggest cemetery and waited until night. She walked that whole cemetery. There was nothing there. No vamps, no demons, not even a tingle of her spidey sense.

"Fuck!" Veronica screamed her frustration. She slammed her fist into the back of a mausoleum. The sting in her knuckles felt so fucking good. She punched and kicked at the stone until it crumbled to dust beneath her fists. Her hands were bloody and her skin was split open

but she didn't care.

It felt good to feel that pain because she knew it was real. She just spent the last few days realizing that everything she ever knew didn't exist. Wherever the fuck she was, none of it was real. No magic. No demons. No vampire. No slayers. Nothing.

It was like the universe or God or Gaea or whoever was just giving her a giant metaphorical fuck you. *You don't exit. Nothing important exists. It's not real. Your not real. You've never been real.*

But the pain in her knuckles? *That* was real. Her blood sprinkled across the grass? *That was real too.* So were the tears in her eyes.

She just wanted to go *home*.

Veronica stumbled away from the ruin that she had created. She fell asleep sitting back against a tombstone somewhere near the end of the cemetery after crying her eyes dry and her throat raw.

—

Ohio, September 21, 1980

All of that research, and drama brought Veronica to where she was now.

She'd woken up Sunday morning with a crick in her neck and a pep in her step. She stopped by a supermarket and stole a few things; a bag of beef jerky, a few granola bars, an apple, a bottle of water and a bike. The people in the 80s were so naive, it was beautiful. A smile here and an inner pocket or two and she was all set. She didn't even have to twitch her witchy nose. The bike had just been leaning against the side of the building, not a lock in site.

Veronica quickly rode to the nearest park, ate her stolen breakfast and then set off once again, in the general direction she needed. She had a torn out page from a book with a map of the city of Cleveland. It was marked down with black dots each crossed over in a big red 'X'. All except one spot just outside the city limits. She had one more place to visit before she gave up and turned herself into CPS.

She'd popped up into existence just down the road from the Richfield Coliseum. She figured her last chance at a way home might be there. She didn't really hope to find anything there, she just would regret it if she didn't check anyway.

By the time she made it on the road leading to the Coliseum it was probably a little past noon. By the time she got to where she had fainted it was probably about two in the afternoon. She was able to tell due to the blood stains on the asphalt, probably from when she hit her head.

She hopped off the bike and wandered into the field. She closed her eyes and let herself just breathe. She let herself open up her senses, both Slayer and Witch, to see if there was any residual mystical energy from her arrival.

Veronica had been so caught up in getting back to the fight, to her family, that she hadn't paid attention to her surroundings. A six year old had managed to sneak up on her after all.

She dropped down onto the floor and into lotus position. She kept her eyes shut and meditated allowing her magic to leak into the air around her, searching for something that wasn't there.

She sat there unmoving for a few hours. Until the sounds of cars and music woke her from her trance. The sun had set. And she had felt no mystical energy but her own.

She was truly alone in a non-magical world. But she was done with being a whiny brat. She was going to hop onto that bike and head back into the city and turn herself in.

She was ten years old again and though she was mentally older and fully capable of protecting herself from whatever anyone threw at her, she knew that staying on her own and living on the streets wasn't something she was capable of doing for long.

Veronica walked back to the side of the road where her stolen bike lay. She hopped on and fully intended to ride her way back towards Cleveland. She began petaling and quickly passed the Coliseum. The lights were flashing and music was pouring through the walls. She

spotted a sign promoting Queen.

Maybe she could make a quick pit stop before heading into the city. Blow off a little steam first. She had lived with Faith for the past few years, she knew the older Slayer would agree. The Dark Slayer did after all take out a bunch of underaged teen girls clubbing during an Apocalypse. Freddy Mercury was dead in her time. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

She veered into the lot.

—

She managed to sneak in and rock out until the very end of the show. Slipping her way into the standing floor zone and weaving through the crowd as the show went on. She might have pickpocketed a few attendees. It's probably what tipped people off that she wasn't where she was supposed to be. "Tie Your Mother Down" was just ending as a hand slammed down onto her shoulder. She was tugged away from the crowd on the floor as "Another One Bites the Dust" started up. She could still hear the music blasting as she was shoved into the back of a cop car.

She didn't care. It was so worth it.

Authors note: This chapter is more of a filler chapter to get Veronica situated in her new world. Next chapter will get to the town of Hawkins for sure. And definitely more of her past with the Scoobies.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3:

Bordeaux France, March 17th, 2000

"Strike!"

Veronica took a step forward, hand curled around her hanbō. Her left foot lead the swing. Her right arm came up and in, supporting the half staff against the line of her forearm and adding more power to her swing. It was blocked.

"Defend!"

Her hands found their proper placement and came up just in time to block a blow that would have come down upon her face.

"Strike!"

She swung the bō low, swiping at his feet. He slid back to avoid it.

"Defend!"

She was slow to block. His staff struck her ribs. Hard. Sending a shock of pain through her left side.

"Strike!"

Her swipe at his side went unmet. He was starting to get irritated now. She knew that he expected a certain level of performance from his student. And he was currently not getting the skill he demanded of her.

"Defend!"

He jabbed the end of his staff into her sternum. She stumbled back, the wind knocked out of her. She clutched at her chest, fingers clawing into her shirt trying to grasp onto something unexplainable. Veronica almost dropped her own weapon in the wave of pain and panic that washed over her. She quickly raised the stick in a

halfhearted attempt to block the next strike that came at her.

"What are you doing? Push through the pain. Focus!"

He swung at her again. She managed to throw herself out of the way just in time. "You are a Potential. You must be ready to perform your duties with the skill necessary to defeat the forces of evil." His statement was punctuated with a slash of his staff, it rapped upon the bones in her wrist.

"Do you think that the vampires and demons you will face will take it easy on you? As I have been doing?" He swept her off her feet and onto the floor with a lazy swipe of his bō. "I'd be surprised if you made it a month."

Veronica was used to this speech. Her Watcher was a very strict man. He liked things done a certain way. *His way*. And when his standards weren't met he wasn't afraid to tear into her until they were right.

When she was younger she used to cry when he'd raise his voice at her, or discipline her. She couldn't understand what she was doing wrong. It seemed no matter how hard she tried it was always wrong. It would *always* be wrong because Blake didn't seem to care for her very much. He seemed to actively resent her presence. It didn't seem to matter to him that she was an actual person. To Blake she was just a weapon. Just an extension of his will. So if she was doing something wrong or performing poorly than so was he.

"Get up, you silly girl!"

Veronica was tired, they had been going at it for hours, but she knew that she wasn't going to be allowed to leave the mat or the training room until she had proven her skill to him. She just needed to get him one time and then she was free.

Just once.

She hopped onto her feet with a renewed sense of purpose. "Come now! Strike!" She swung hard, her staff connecting with his. The recoil sent a sharp pain through her fingers but she kept her grip tight.

The intensity of the sparring increased. Her Watcher was no longer pulling punches. He struck at her with a strength he rarely showed in training. He was quick as well. She was lucky that even as a Potential her strength and reflexes were stronger than average, she would have been out ages ago.

Strike. Defend. Strike. Defend. Strike. Defend.

"Faster!"

StrikeDefendStrikeDefend.

"Faster! Strike!"

One hand came to grasp the bottom side of her staff and lead the weapon in a quick jab towards her opponent's navel.

"Defe-"

He dodged the jab but left himself open as he raised his staff doing so. Her bō went out under his armpit coming up behind his shoulder. She widened her stance, planting a foot between his open legs. She leaned forward hooking the staff under her opponent's arm and pulled him forward, tripping him on her leg as she did so. He flipped over head first and slammed his back against the mat. He grunted as he pulled himself up off the mat, his back to her.

"Finally." She could hear the sneer in his voice. She quickly stood at attention, holding her staff to her side and dropping her head down, eyes focused on the floor.

Veronica's Watcher turned to face her. "You will die." He slowly approached her, each step deliberate. She watched his bare feet as he stalked towards her. "You need to listen to me, Veronica." He stopped, inches from her. "Look at me." His hand came up to grasp her chin. His fingers digging into her cheeks as he forced her head up. She stared into his cold eyes.

"You will die a violent and cruel death, Veronica. And you will die alone. You are weak, I can see it in you.

This world is full of Evil and eventually you will be called upon to

fight against it. You have the potential to be a great soldier. A powerful weapon. But as of now you are wasting my time."

"You need to try harder, Veronica. You need to be stronger. Do you understand?" She wanted to rage at him.

What do you want from me? What more can I do?

She trained and she studied and she fought and she *tried*. Every single day. She had no rest, no breaks, no weekends. She ate, slept and breathed demonology, battle, war tactics, and witchcraft. She knew that she would spend the rest of her life doing exactly that. Nothing but that until she died.

Sometimes she hoped she'd die soon. That she would be called as a Slayer and she would die a quick death at the hands of some random vampire. Just a quick snap of the neck and she would be free from the burden.

"Yes." She swallowed back her anger, making sure that her face showed no outward emotion. She stared into his cold dark eyes. "Yes, sir. I understand."

He released her face and turned to leave the room. He paused as he reached the doorway.

"Happy Birthday, Veronica." He never looked back at her.

Oh right. She had forgotten.

She turned eight that day.

—

Hawkins Indiana, July 25th, 1983

Veronica had been in this alternate universe for almost three years.

She had been picked up at the concert back in 1980 and had been driven into Akron, Ohio instead of Cleveland. She had quickly let the officers that had taken her in know that she had no parents or living relatives and that she suggested they called Child Services. This had

baffled them a bit but they had done what was asked.

Veronica told these cops that her name was Veronica Lehané, not Hernandez like she had back in Cleveland. She figured that she might as well start new. New life, new name. But she still wanted to take a piece of home with her, so Lehané it was. Plus she had wanted to disassociate her case with the one in Cleveland. So she was now ten year old Veronica Lehané whose parents had died years ago and who had been unofficially living with "family friends" for a few years. She made it all sound really shady, moving around every few months, never going to public school or visiting the doctors, how her parents' "friends" asked her to call them Mom and Dad from the moment they took her in. She implied she had been kidnapped.

The woman from CPS had been horrified. They immediately asked for a description of said kidnappers, she gave them a description of the future "Brangelina" and called it a day. When asked for information on her birth parents she told them she didn't know as she was very young when they had died. They put out a search to see if she had matched any old missing children descriptions. She hadn't. They kept her in a group home near the police station while they made sure that no one would be missing her before they began the process of putting her in the foster system.

Veronica was then officially Veronica Lehané, and boy was that a mind fuck. She had secretly hoped that she eventually would have bore the Lehané name. She just hadn't expected that this was the way it would have happened.

Veronica was officially a ward of the state and she had been put into a group home for a month before she was forced to move on to the next one. She had witnessed a male member of the staff take a fifteen year old girl into a back room, alone. She had then followed faking naivety as she claimed to have been looking for the bathroom. The girl had looked relieved. The man not so much.

He had cornered Veronica, trying to threaten her into keeping quiet. Saying that if she didn't keep her mouth shut that both her and the older girl would be out on the streets. *Big mistake. Huge.* Veronica did not take threats well. Her initial plan had been simply to be there to stop him from acting on his urges. But now he had threatened her.

She didn't give a fuck if he thought he ran that group home. She wasn't worried about living out on the streets. She would be fine. She could take care of herself. But the kids in that home could not, and she wasn't about to let him think that he could mess around with the lives of these kids.

Fuck him.

She broke his wrist. Shattered it really, but that was his fault. He shouldn't have put his hand on her shoulder like that. She told him that he should quit. That no one would believe that she had hurt him because she was just a little girl and he was a grown ass man. How could she have physically hurt him? It wasn't possible. He was gone for a week but came back with a cast on. She didn't like that. So she claimed that he had touched her. Told every staff member that she could. Even roughed herself up a bit.

They believed her.

He was fired and arrested. And she was transferred into another group home. Before she left though, the girl he had actually tried to assault had come up to her. She had thanked her, with tears in her eyes. Gave Veronica a hug and thanked her. And Veronica felt a sense of pride in herself that she had never experienced as a Slayer.

It felt good, saving the world from evil and whatnot but it was a thankless job. The people she saved rarely even acknowledged her work. The whole vampire reveal and anti-Slayer shit just made the public see her as a monster. Yes, she killed things. But they were demons, soulless creatures that fed on human beings, killed viciously and indiscriminately, and ate kittens. She was doing it to protect people and all she got in return was hate.

It wasn't like she needed praise or whatever to do her job. She knew that that wasn't going to happen. She just wanted to be acknowledged every once in a while. She did put her life on the line, after all.

So when that girl came up to her, shaking and crying and *thanked her*. She damn near almost cried herself. She felt like what she had done had mattered for once. That she would be remembered for what she

had done. And that she had saved this girl in a way that was more important than all of the demon victims she had rescued put all together.

It was the first time in a long time where she felt like a hero.

So she left that home with a smile on her face, knowing that she could live through whatever it was that came her way next.

What was next happened to be another group home. For six months. It was an all girls home. She had no issue with this one. They just were underfunded by the state, she could tell that they were struggling to keep up with the amount of girls they had already had. She asked her case worker about a transfer it took a couple weeks but she had found Veronica a new home.

She was taken in by a lovely family as a foster daughter. An interracial couple in their late forties. They were both doctors. The husband was a pediatrician and the mother was an OBGYN. They met in medical school. They were kind and sweet and had two older kids that were nice as well. They were genuinely good people. She kind of liked them and for some strange reason they seemed to like her back.

The oldest teen, the son, was to start college the fall after she arrived. At Perdue University. The family was going to make the move with him from Akron to Indianapolis, so they'd only be a few hours away. Veronica fully expected to be sent to another group home but they surprised her by wanting to take her with them. It took about a month of paperwork and petitioning but it happened.

Veronica hadn't been sure how she felt about that though. She liked the family well enough but she knew that she shouldn't allow herself to get attached.

This world she now lived in didn't have magic, but that didn't mean that she was cut off from whatever source had previously powered her own. She still had her magic, she was still a Witch. She still had her Slayer strength, speed, reflexes and healing. She still had that instinct that told her that she had some kind of purpose in being here.

During The Battle, and she felt as though capitalization was required when referring to the event that had brought her here, she had this tight feeling in her gut that she wasn't going to be there after the fight. She had been right about that, just not in the way she had originally thought. She didn't die, she somehow tumbled into an alternate universe. She had actually felt like she had known what was going to happen at least a few days before The Battle.

Slayer dreams were ways in which Sineya and the Powers that Be were able to warn a Slayer of what was to come. Most Potentials began to dream of past Slayers and the lives they lived and the deaths they experienced. It was Sineya's idea of a history lesson. Faith and Buffy had both mentioned sharing dreams and somehow predicting Dawn's creation. So sometimes the dreams were prophetic. They believed the ominous future-y dreams were provided by the Powers.

Veronica wasn't sure if she had dreamed something like that leading up to The Battle, but the moment she stepped foot on the site of the Hellmouth she knew what her destiny held. Sometimes she still got that feeling, that tightness in her gut that told her she needed to do something, or go somewhere.

She had that gut feeling when she asked to transfer from her second group home. And she had a similar feeling when her foster family asked to take her with them when they moved out of state. She wanted to tell them no, that she couldn't be what they wanted her to be. She was never going to be able to be a full fledged member of their family. She had too many secrets that she had to keep hidden. She could never truly open up to them the way they did with her. And that was unfair. They deserved to have someone that wanted to be a part of their family.

She was going to ask them not to bother but as she opened her mouth to object she was suddenly hit with a force of knowledge that she needed to go out of state with them. She needed to be in Indiana. She didn't know why, just that she needed to do it. So she kept her mouth shut.

She let them get their hopes up.

She felt like an asshole.

Veronica had been with them 11 months when they had asked for her permission to adopt her. It was the day of her birthday and they had all been there for her special day. She received presents and cake and then they dropped the bomb.

The hopeful look on the mother's face was enough for her to say yes. She couldn't be so mean to the woman who had tried her hardest to make her feel welcome in their home. She had prepared a room for her, bought her new clothes and bought her a Walkman as a Christmas present when she found out her love for music.

They had actually bonded over their mutual love for music. Veronica had had a thing for oldies in her time. Songs of the 60s and 70s were her favorites. She loved the punk scene of the 70s and Motown artists of the 60s. She had spent a lot of time in her universe sitting around listening to records with Faith and Robin, they'd take turns playing tracks and educating her on good music. The woman was surprised that the little Hispanic girl knew every word to most of the records she played: Marvin Gaye, Mary Wells, Brenton Wood, Al Green and Gladys Knight. She was happy to have someone to share her music with as her own kids didn't really enjoy it much, they preferred their own generation's music.

She had bonded with this woman and she didn't want to be the one to hurt her. She found herself about to say yes, but the Powers stopped her voice in its tracks. She had to tell them no. She did tell them no.

The family had been disappointed but hadn't pushed the issue. They had had other foster children before. They knew that most children in the system had issues. Mental and emotional. They planned to let her stay, work on having her open up to them and asking again when she was more comfortable. She knew that that was their plan. They were the type of people to never leave someone they loved behind. And they had grown to love Veronica. And she couldn't allow herself to love them back.

She contacted her new caseworker and asked to be placed in a group home. She apologized to her foster family, and they said they understood, but they never really would understand the reason behind her decision. She thanked them for everything they'd done for

her and offered to give back the things they'd bought her. They refused. They made her take all her cassette tapes she collected, all the clothes they'd bought her and the Walkman they gave her.

Her foster sister even gave her a brand new sketch pad as a goodbye present. The rest of the family gave her colored pencils and charcoals. She hadn't even realized that they had noticed her habit of drawing. It wasn't something she did often, but it was something she had like to think she was good at.

She *really* felt like an asshole.

She moved into a group home a month after her foster family had asked to adopt her. This group home was co-Ed, but was meant for younger children. She was one of the oldest children there at 12. She spent 11 months there until she turned 13 for the second time in March 1983. She was now over the age limit for the group home she was in. But for some reason or other every other group home in Indianapolis was somehow unable to take her in. The surrounding counties were somehow also unable to take her in.

She had a feeling there was a little *Divine* intervention taking place.

She spent another three months in that group home until they were able to find a foster home willing to take her in. She ended up being placed in a little town in the middle of Roane County.

So that brought her to where she was today. Stepping out out of her caseworker's car. They had spent the last couple of hours making the drive over.

She was now the newest resident of Hawkins, Indiana.

Yay.

—

It turned out that Veronica's new foster parent was a single woman in her fifties. Her name was Marianne Wilkes. She was a short woman, only about 5'1" at best. She was blue eyed and blonde haired, or at least she had been so when she was younger. She had many pictures lining the walls of her house. Pictures of her in her youth, mostly.

She had been a delicate looking thing, all dainty shoes and ruffled dresses, pale smooth skin and shiny hair that curled into ringlets.

She looked like a porcelain doll in the photos of her past and she still held herself in the same delicate fashion. Small kitten heels clacked against the wood of the porch as she met them at the wore a simple dress that swished about mid calf as she walked. It was a pale blue. She looked like Julie freaking Andrews.

And it was a far cry from the way Veronica carried herself.

Veronica's body was now currently thirteen. She was almost caught up to the way her body had previously been before she had been de-aged. She was just shy of 5'2" which was awesome because that was actually an inch taller than she had been in her world. Veronica liked to think that her being an activated Slayer had affected her new growth, plus she had a little more muscle in her legs and arms than she had previously had as well. The only reason she would say that she was still not physically caught up to her fourteen year old self was that she was still waiting for her breasts to fully kick in. She had liked where she was at previously and she was still waiting for them to reach that point. She was little more than an "A" at the moment and it kind of made her sad.

Veronica's sense of style reflected what she had worn in the year 2006. She was a grungy bitch and she knew it. She was wearing a pair of high waisted black skinny jeans. She'd actually had to tailor the pants to fit the length of her legs, they were a good four inches too long at first. She wore a loose fitting grey Clash t-shirt tucked into her pants and the same black bomber jacket she had nicked from a lost and found back in 1980. She also wore her black Doc Martens and a black choker necklace around her bare throat. Her hair was pulled up into a high ponytail that brushed across her back as she walked.

She definitely dressed older than she looked, but she couldn't help it. She was not about to run around in the things the other girls her age did. She had the taste of the seventeen year old that she should have been. And though she guessed she should have also had the mentality of a seventeen year old as well, she often found that her behavior didn't match that.

She found that being here in a world without magic and without responsibilities made her feel younger than she had ever felt even when she had lived through her first childhood. As a Potential being raised by the Watchers Council she had never experienced a regular childhood and despite the Scoobies' best efforts her life as a Slayer hadn't been much different. Sure she had been free to be herself, to discover who she really was as she hadn't really known before. But she still had the weight of the world upon her shoulders. She wasn't alone in that burden but it hadn't really lightened the load either.

Being where she was now allowed her the chance to finally be a real kid. She got to go to school. *That* had been a new and fun experience. She had been homeschooled while she had been trained by the Council and she had received her GED after being taken in by the Scoobies. Her peers had been less mature and less emotionally developed than she had been, but she soon found herself to be none too different from them. She had a lot more academic knowledge than her classmates but she had fit right in with the other kids at her school and in her group homes.

She wasn't really sure what that said about her psyche. She chose to ignore it.

Her caseworker left almost as soon as the introductions had been made.

"Well don't just stand there young lady, have a seat." Marianne went ahead sat herself down in an armchair, leaving the sofa open. Veronica left her bags where they had been piled by the door and followed the woman's lead.

"Yes, ma'am." She gently lowered herself onto the cushion, crossed her legs at the ankles and placed her hands in her lap. She was doing her best Princess Diaries impression, she had a feeling Marianne would appreciate the effort.

She did. The woman nodded in approval. "Let's get down to business. This isn't my first rodeo. So let me get through my spiel and then we can move on. Now I don't like to think of myself as a particularly strict person but I do have my rules and I expect them to be followed."

Marianne's blue eyes gazed into her face, searching for something. It unnerved her. She felt like the older woman was stripping back the layers of everything that Veronica was. And judging it. Whether she approved or not had yet to be seen.

"I don't suffer fools." She wagged her finger at the girl. That was good. Neither did Veronica.

"Rule number one. You are to call me Marianne. I don't need the false proprietary and I do not tolerate nicknames. So it is Marianne or Ma'am. Number two. You go to school, without fail. We'll head off to get you signed up in a little bit. Rule number three, you tell me where you are going and when you will be back, and no staying out after ten. Rule four you help out around here. I cook and clean myself but I expect a little help from time to time. And rule five, no boys. Just follow all that and we should be okay."

"You got all that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Any questions?"

"Just, where will I be staying?" The girl walked back toward her bags by the door. Swinging the two heaviest on one shoulder and scooping up the last bag in the other hand. Her bags were really heavy. She didn't want the older woman trying to help pick one up and question how Veronica had held them all so easily earlier.

"Don't worry I have a room for you." Marianne lead Veronica down a hallway passed a kitchen, dining room and a few more closed doors before reaching the end of the hallway.

It was a fairly large room, with a full bed against the far wall with two nightstands on either side. The comforter was a nice shade of blue, dark and fluffy looking. A desk and a few shelves were by the left hand side and a closet with a mirrored door. To the very left of the room's entrance, opposite the bed was a long dresser, with three drawers and a cabinet on either side. On the right side of the room was a tall lamp and-another closet?

Veronica opened the door on the right to reveal a bathroom. *Well that was generous.*

"This room was originally the master bedroom. There were two other rooms connected by a bathroom, I've converted one into an office and the other was a guest bedroom. I spent so much time in that office I decided to just knock the wall down between the two."

The Slayer looked back at the older woman. "Thank you." She placed her bags onto the bed before turning back to Marianne. "I really appreciate you letting me into your home. I'll make sure to follow your rules."

"Good." The woman nodded before turning from the room, she paused at the threshold and turned toward the girl. "Come now, we have to get to the school soon before it closes. We need to get you enrolled, pick out your classes and see about getting you anything you need from town as well."

"Yes, ma'am."

—

It turned out that Hawkins Middle School had not received her transcripts from her previous school. They wanted to put her into seventh grade based on her age. She flat out refused. She had already finished the seventh grade the previous year. It was bad enough she had already had to redo a middle school curriculum, she wasn't about to do the same year over twice.

She opted to test into her classes. It would take a couple hours but at least she would be able to leave knowing that she would be taking the right classes come the end of summer. The teacher assigned to her testing, a Mr. Clarke, told them it would take a few hours to administer all the tests. He'd managed to gather the final exams and answer sheets from the finals taken the previous school year. Veronica didn't expect it to take that long. They didn't know her academic level though and she understood the caution. Marianne decided to take the time to head out and get some chores done and pick up some dinner.

The tests were easy. She finished up each exam in under fifteen minutes each. They were just multiple choice for the most part, some fill in the blanks. She was sure she'd passed with flying colors. Math, Earth Science, Social Studies, Language Arts, Spanish. She was an hour ahead of schedule.

She sat patiently while Mr. Clarke graded her tests and took the man in. He seemed like a genuinely nice man. A teacher that actually liked his job. She knew this to be true as he had volunteered to give her her exams, unlike the other teachers who had all looked perturbed at the thought of staying after their meeting had finished. He had introduced himself with a carefree smile and gentle voice. He also had several pictures of his students littered across the room. Winners of science fairs, what seemed to be an AV club, and a class photo of what was probably last year's eighth grade class. He actually cared about his students.

That was rare in teachers. She'd been to six different schools at this point. She'd know.

"Well," Mr. Clarke had settled the last of the exam papers into the pile with the rest. "I'd hate to be the bringer of bad news..." he trailed off.

Veronica stood from her seat, an objection on her lips.

"But, welcome to Hawkins Middle eighth grade class."

His mustache twitched as he smiled, and Veronica let the fight die out of her. He walked out from behind his desk and met her at the desk she had been using. "Wow. You sure did go through those tests pretty quickly. And you received perfect scores!" He grinned at her as she

Veronica let out a little laugh, she really had been scared for a second. Though she knew she knew her stuff, she actually knew stuff beyond this stuff. She just hadn't expected a joke like that from a teacher.

"Yeah, well the tests weren't actually that hard. I'd actually already taken these classes, my transcripts just weren't sent over. I just wanted the problem dealt with as soon as possible."

"I completely understand. I'm glad to see that you were willing to give up a summer afternoon to sit around and take tests at a school you don't even go to yet. That is the kind of dedication to education that I like to see in my students." He held out his hand for a shake. "I'm looking forward to having you in my biology class. Hopefully that dedication stays true."

She accepted his handshake. His grip was firm, as was hers, she respected that he treated her like an adult in that regard. Men seemed to barely make an effort in shaking a woman's hand, treating them like delicate flowers in doing so. And most adults didn't even shake the hands of children, dismissing the sign of respect completely.

Mr. Clarke was good people.

With an awesome 'stache.

"Wicked. I'll see you in class then." Two quick pumps and the shake was done. She quickly scooped up her jacket and waited by the door as he also had turned to gather his things. They walked down the hall towards the main office to give the results to the administrators.

Veronica took in the nice shade of blue that lined the lockers and walls. "Was that an accent I heard earlier?"

That made the girl pause. "Most people don't notice it right away, if at all. I was... raised by a British couple. My accent is mostly American, I'd had some...foster sisters in the beginning. We were all American but once it was just me my accent began to take on some British pronunciations. I also spent a while in a lot of different European countries. My accent likes to switch between a lot of different things." She shrugged her shoulders at an attempt at nonchalance. "I don't have to try very hard for the American, it is my natural accent, sometimes the others slip in on certain words though."

"Hawkins must seem like a big change from all that. You're probably used to big cities, right?" They'd almost reached the office, just one more corner to turn.

"No. Not really. We mostly stayed in the countryside."

She was visualizing large isolated manors, empty except for her and her Watchers. "And so far I like the people here a lot better than those in Europe. Far better."

With that she turned the corner and spotted Marianne talking to one of the office clerks. "Aw. There she is." She waved Veronica over. "Figured I'd come back early. You seem the smart type."

That made her smile.

Things were settled quickly after that. She would be starting school in three weeks and she was free to go.

Her and Marianne made their way back to the woman's car, an old Ford Pinto in a fading yellow.

They turned the corner looping around to head back toward the house. "I don't feel like cooking today. There's a diner not to far from the house. Benny's. We're eating there."

Veronica nodded her head, humming an affirmative. She drummed her fingers along the outside of the passenger door, her arm resting half in and half out of the car.

They'd just reached the train tracks when a group of kids riding bikes rounded a corner she had not noticed was there. Four boys around her age were riding their way, taking up both lanes. Three stayed to their right, the other broke off and rode along the grass on their left.

He was about her age, maybe younger. He looked small, but then again so was she. Brown hair in an unfortunate bowl cut. And as they began to pass each other she noticed his eyes were brown.

His eyes locked with hers and it was like she couldn't breathe. She felt that pull in her stomach, that tightness in her chest. But this feeling was different from the way she had felt when she had been "guided" before. It felt cold, and dark.

It felt familiar though.

He rode on, not seeming to have noticed anything off. She watched him in the side view mirror as he and his friends merged back

together. Her eyes stayed focused on his yellow vest as they got smaller in the distance.

This feeling in her stomach was something she hadn't felt in over three years. It was like her Slayer sense had awoken.

Something horrible was coming and that boy was somehow involved.

She wanted nothing to do with it.

The pull in her chest told her she didn't have a choice.

4. Chapter 4

Trigger warning: bullying and homophobic slur. Just one. Damn, its like I'm really trying to tick everything off the list. my stories are not for the faint of heart.

Chapter 4:

Hawkins Indiana, August 14, 1983

Veronica had spent the last three weeks getting to know the town. Marianne was actually a lawyer, the best in the county she claimed. Veronica was inclined to believe her. The first time the young Slayer had seen the woman strut down the hallway in a dress suit she felt like she was seeing a different person entirely. Marianne had gone from *The Sound of Music* to *The Devil Wears Prada*. She looked a lot like Meril Streep had in the movie with her short hair swept elegantly to one side. She radiated strength and competence.

She had spent quite a bit of time in her office the last few weeks, making phone calls, doing paperwork and lawyering in general. She had had to leave the town a couple of times to visit clients or go to court. She was never gone more than a day and for some reason she trusted Veronica alone in her house by herself.

It was a lot of trust to put in a stranger, let alone in the hands of a young teenager. Veronica wasn't one to intentionally cause trouble anyway, plus she was pretty sure she'd really have to try hard to find trouble in a small town like Hawkins. It was a small town where everyone knew everyone and there was hardly any drama besides a little neighborly dispute every now and again, maybe a lost dog or two.

Marianne also made sure to let her know that she had asked the neighbor across the street to check up on her while she was out. Marianne had been gone three times in three weeks, and all three times a neighbor did indeed come over to see how she was. The first two times was a woman in her early forties, a Mrs. Buckley. Just that afternoon she had sent her daughter over. The older teen had done little more than scanned her eyes along Veronica as if checking for

physical harm before tossing a "Well, you're not dead," over her shoulder and heading back to her own house. She didn't even give the girl her name. Veronica didn't blame her, she looked like she had just been woken up, her short hair in disarray and dressed in an oversized t-shirt and gym shorts.

Veronica explored the town, visiting the library more than a few times. She'd also had Marianne drop her off in town and bought herself a bike on her third day in Hawkins.

She had tried to get to know her neighborhood on her second day there and soon found that other than the little strip of residential area she lived in, about ten or so houses up and down Kerley, she was surrounded by nothing but woods and farms. So she had dipped into her personal funds to buy herself a bike.

Over the years she had built up a good amount of cash as an emergency fund. She had gathered about two hundred dollars in cash via her pickpocket spree when she first arrived in this universe, the police that had picked her up hadn't searched her nor had they mentioned her little crime spree at all. She steadily grew that fund, she had been a paperboy for a local newspaper back in Akron, she had traded homework for cash wherever she could, and she had mowed more than a few lawns while living in Indianapolis.

She had had about four hundred dollars stacked away and she had used about a hundred of that to buy herself a brand new BMX bike. She had specifically wanted a BMX bike because they were sturdy and made for off road and she had a feeling she'd need something that could take damage incase something happened. She also liked the fact that the frame was all black and that the tires were lined in a nice shade of teal. She had used the thing to ride into town and back and she did not regret her purchase.

On the nights where Marianne was away Veronica would leave the house and spend the night in the woods. The forest separated the residential strip of Kerley and Cornwallis from the fairgrounds. Train tracks ran through the woods but as far as Veronica could tell they hadn't been used in years.

She would pull on her boots, throw on a jacket, pack a backpack and

make sure her trusty knife was strapped to her leg. It was almost always on her person, unless she was in the shower or sleeping it was strapped onto her body somewhere. She tucked it under her mattress at night and it stayed there until she dressed again in the morning.

The night before she was due to start school she decided to go for a "midnight stroll." She made her way out of the house and into the woods, headed toward the abandoned tracks. The moon was high in the sky, first quarter, and bathed the path in an erie blue-green.

Any decent Slayer was always aware of the moon cycle and though there weren't any werewolves or other cyclic creatures around it was a habit she hadn't dropped. Veronica still occasionally patrolled the cemetery as well, she hadn't visited Hawkins's yet but she had in Indianapolis and Akron. No vampires either, just her and the regular *dead* dead. She didn't expect there to be anything out there besides maybe some shady people. She just felt comfortable amongst the headstones, it was nostalgic.

She had patrolled with Faith a few times in Cleveland. As a head Slayer Faith wasn't required to patrol anymore, the Minis took on the graveyards and the ones with more experience took on the wiggy cases that littered the Hellmouth. The Slayer just enjoyed an occasional dusting and tagged along when Veronica was scheduled.

Veronica's actual patrolling partner had been Andrew.

Most of the activated Potentials had been older, already in their teens or twenties. Most hadn't been trained by the council as Veronica had but they took to the training and strength relatively easily, at least the ones who had decided to join the New Council. The younger girls were all put into a training camp where they were taught the basics of being a Slayer and about the supernatural in general. Veronica though had been training to be a Slayer since she could walk and talk.

She didn't need anymore teaching, nor did she want it.

So she had been grouped with the older Slayers who all either patrolled solo or in pairs. The others thought she was too young to patrol by herself, but none of them wanted to go with her either.

That was fine with her. She didn't particularly like any of the Potentials that had come from Sunnydale anyway. Fighting The First alongside each other had not warmed her to them either. So she was stuck without a partner, she had bullied Andrew to go with her the first time.

She had tugged him by the back of his shirt and dragged him into Giles's office for approval. They said she couldn't patrol alone, not that another Slayer needed to accompany her. Giles had reluctantly agreed that she was indeed correct in that assessment. She had pulled the nerd out of the room and out to a cemetery before Giles had even finished his sentence.

He had complained about being hungry and cold all night. The following night she had thrown him a satchel full of his favorite snacks and a fluffy sweater and had asked him to go with her again. Andrew had smiled and said yes. That night he complained about being bait, but he still showed up the following night anyway.

It had become their thing. They walked along the tombstones and he chatted on about his nerdy stuff and Veronica patrolled. Eventually she came to enjoy his nerd talk. It was why she always patrolled these empty cemeteries with a small smile on her face. She knew that she wouldn't encounter anything there but her own memories. It was easier to visit them in the cover of darkness where no one but the dead could see.

She frequented the graveyards a lot when she lived in the group homes, in the foster home only when she was sure she wouldn't be caught.

She who hangs out a lot in cemeteries.

The only reason she hadn't visited the one in Hawkins was that she was actively avoiding it. Something about that one boy made her premonition pull-or whatever it was- go crazy. She hadn't been ready to deal with that yet. But Veronica realized that tomorrow she would be starting her first day of school, and so would that boy with the bowl cut.

She couldn't really put it off for much longer. Hence the trek into the

woods. She had some things she needed to figure out.

Veronica had reached a point in the forest where the trees had blocked out the light of the moon. She quickly cast a spell.

She summoned a ball of light, wisps of magic in shades of yellows and golds and ambers flowed from her open palms. Between her hands the magic from each palm drew together forming a tight ball of light. It floated an inch above her hand and was the size of a baseball. The strands of light coming from within swirled and moved as though there was some unseen current within.

The spell was silent. It was one that she had used often back in her home dimension, the words had been memorized quickly. The Latin had been essential to her casting before. Invoking the magic in the dead language had been important, it focused the ambient power of the earth's natural magic. Magic in her world had been almost sentient, it heard the spell, read your intent and did what you asked. Here, in this new universe, her magic was different.

She learned that words didn't matter. Neither did elements, natural object, or rituals. She used to have to pull much of the power behind her spells from the things around her, from nature or Higher Beings. Now that there seemed to be no evidence of any of those natural magics existing, she had to power her spells on her own. The power within herself was surprisingly potent. Her intent and her bending her own magic to her will was enough to get things done. Veronica's powers came almost effortlessly. Small things were as easy as a wave of the hand or the snap of her fingers. Bigger things required a bit more energy and focus but she was now able to do things she couldn't have before.

Veronica used her summoned ball of light to help guide her along her chosen path. When she reached the train tracks she let the ball of light absorb back into her palms. She pulled off her backpack, took out a candy bar. She opened it halfway, took a bite and stuck the thing in her mouth, holding it between her teeth as she unpacked the picnic blanket she'd packed. She laid the red and black quilt across the tracks and plopped herself down into a lotus position. She quickly finished off her Musketeers bar and emptied out the rest of her bag onto the blanket.

She pulled out a map of Hawkins she'd borrowed from Marianne, a couple of candles, some rocksalt and a pestle and mortar. Veronica was going to try her hand at alomancy. It wasn't something she had attempted before. She didn't particularly care for divination. It was usually just a bunch of mumbo jumbo bullshit, but even a broken clock is correct once a day, or whatever.

Veronica lit each candle by touching a finger to each wick. She set them around the map for lighting. The rocksalt she poured into the mortar, she ground it down into fine pieces. Alomancy was very similar to scrying, where a crystal was hovered over a map and was pulled toward magical hotspots. Think Charmed. Alomancy used ingredients with magical properties, usually salt crystal or ash. She would toss them into the air and hopefully be able to read something via the patterns it made.

That had been Veronica's original plan, but as magic was different here there was no guarantee that it would work. The salt had no magical properties itself, and there was no ambient magic to guide the particles either.

Veronica rolled up her pant leg and pulled out her knife from its sheath.

There was no magic in the salt but there was magic in her blood.

She brought the tip of the knife to the edge of her palm, right below her thumb, and dragged the blade through her flesh. The cut would heal by morning. Blood welled and she let it fall into the mortar.

She tied a bandanna around her palm and quickly ground her blood in with the powdered salt. She held the hand that wasn't bleeding over the bowl and willed energy into it. Heat waves poured out of her palm and into the bowl drying the mixture and leaving behind red powder, like the finest sand.

Veronica set the mortar down, scooping up a handful of the mix and held it above the map. She closed her eyes and let the sand sprinkle down onto the map, moving in a slow spiral in the air, she willed her magic to seek a similar energy.

When she opened her eyes and peered down as the grains began to pool together toward a single spot on the map.

In the middle of the woods.

Great. More trekking through the fucking forest. She felt like a fucking Hobbit.

Hawkins Indiana, August 15th, 1983

Will Byers walked his bike over to the racks in front of Hawkins Middle School. It was his first day of seventh grade and he was nervous. His brother Johnathan told him that the English teacher, Mr. Gursky, always had a pop quiz the first day of class based on the assigned summer reading.

He'd rode to school early in the hopes that he could get in some extra reading. He'd read the book over twice but he'd rather be safe than sorry. He parked his bike at the east racks where he and the Party always left their bikes. When he reached the usual spot he noticed there was another student already there.

Their body was still straddling the seat, boot cover feet straining on their toes as they hunched over to fiddle with something. A dark ponytail swished at their back as they huffed out a sigh. Music poured from a set of headphones around their neck. Fast heavy guitar, loud drums.

"Motherfucking piece of shit."

Will quickly ducked his head as though the words were aimed at him. He tensed his grip on his bike and slotted it in place. He chanced a glance at the girl still playing with something at the front of her own bike. He noticed it was a lock. Which was weird. No one used locks in Hawkins.

As though she could feel his eyes on her, the girl tensed and snapped her head back to look at him. Her brow was furrowed and her lips drawn in a hard line. Will met her brown, nearly black, eyes after taking in her features. She had wide almond shaped eyes. A round

and slightly upturned nose, high cheeks and skin a shade or two darker than Dustin's. Will could feel himself starting to blush at being caught staring. Her face softened a bit.

"Sorry, I-" she cleared her throat. "I wasn't cursing at you. This lock just won't-" she looked back at her hands and tried once more. It clicked shut. "Got it!" She smirked to herself before looking back towards him, the smile faded. Her eyes stared at him intensely.

"I wasn't. I-I didn't think you were talking to me." No one really talked to Will or his friends unless it was to throw insults at them. He'd tensed at the words as a reflex, used to them usually being directed his way.

He was a little intimidated by the girl, but he really hadn't thought that she was talking to him.

"It's fine." Will hiked his backpack up and quickly turned to leave. He mumbled a barely there "bye," and headed off towards the library where he would hopefully be able to get in a few chapters before first period began.

He'd just rounded the corner over by the back entrance of the school when he was shoved to the ground. His hands shot out to take the brunt of the fall, sending a shock of pain up his forearms a moment before pain bloomed across his backside as the rest of his body caught up.

"Watch where you're going, Freak!" James Dante stood over him, smiling as Will tried to pick himself up. He'd gotten a leg under himself when he was pulled backwards by his backpack. His feet dug into the ground, his hands struggled to find something to hold onto and clawed out dirt as he was dragged across the grass.

James had come up behind him when he was down. His hands gripped the straps at Will's back, pulling the boy along with the bag. Will let his arms slip through the holes. He was free from the bully's clutches but his bag wasn't.

"Where are the rest of your little freak friends? Finally stop wanting to hang out with a Fairy like you? Huh?" James swung the backpack

across his own shoulder. He sneered down at the younger boy as he finally stood. Will dusted off his clothes.

"Just give me back my bag, okay?" His voice came out steady, and he was relieved. His legs were shaking where he stood, and his stomach was tied in knots. He didn't know what to do. "I'm s-serious." There went his cool.

"I-I'm s-s-serious." The older boy scrunched up his face, exaggerated a stutter, mocking the Byers boy. "You're starting to sound like Toothless." James lunged forward and Will flinched back. The move had been a fake. The bully threw his head back in a laugh.

James was the second half of the bullying duo that was James Dante and Troy Walsh. The Party just called them mouth-breathers. Troy was usually the one that started up with the teasing. He liked to toss out insults whenever he passed them. James though, James was the one who started the fights, the physical kind that left Will with bruises on his body that he'd hide from his mother and brother. He liked to try to single out Will by himself a lot. Will never really told the Party and he definitely never told his parents about how he was singled out.

"What's in the bag, Fairy? What's so important you need it back? Huh?" James began to unzip the bag, he pulled out a brown paper bag that had Will's lunch. "Bologna sandwich from Mom?" He slammed the lunch onto the ground and stomped his foot down the center of it before Will could even react.

Will was angry now. He lunged at the older boy, his short arms reaching for the backpack the bully held away. "Stop! Give it back!" Will was pushed back, a simple shove against his forehead threw him off, he hadn't expected that.

James tipped the backpack over, shaking it, and emptying it out all over the grass. "Oops!" He tosses the bag back at Will. "Sorry about that, Fag-"

He never finished his sentence.

A boot had come from the side, kicking James right across the face.

The boy went down. Hard.

The girl from earlier, by the bikes, had stormed up to the guy and kicked him across his face. She did some kind of jump kicking out with one leg and landing on the other.

"You homophobic piece of shit!" She walked up to James while he was still down and kicked him again, this time in the thigh.

"Who the hell are you?" The bully rolled away from her and quickly got back up to his feet.

The girl however simply stepped in front of Will blocking most of him from James's sight, she was the same height as him and it didn't cover much. "I'm your worst fucking nightmare. That's who I am."

Will couldn't see the other boy over her high ponytail. The breeze had blown by and her curls ticked against his nose. He took a step back to take in the situation.

The girl- Will didn't know her but that wasn't a big deal in itself because he didn't know a lot of people at Hawkins Middle, just his friends and a few people in his classes. The girl stood lazily in front of him, her back was to him but he could tell that her form was totally relaxed. She wasn't tensed up for a fight, or out of fear, not at all.

James, from what he could see of him, had his hands up in front of his face like a boxer. He was ready for a fight. Will wondered if he would swing at the girl.

"Look," James lowered his hands a bit when he realized it was a tiny girl standing in front of him and not someone else. "I don't even know who you are, okay? Just get out of here before you regret it? You have nothing to do with this."

"Yeah, let me think about that." She brought her hand up to her face, her pointer finger held to her chin and her head shifted to the side. "It's gonna have to be a no for me, asshole." Her hand came down to rest on her hip. "How about you walk away, and I don't make *you* regret it."

"Can't you ju-"

"Nope." She popped the "P" dramatically. "Not going to happen. Beat it, or get beat. Those are your two options." She huffed out a sigh. "Look you have ten seconds to leave or I start swinging."

She held up a hand and ticked off a finger.

"What now Byers? You gonna let a girl fight for you?!" Will was going to let her fight for him. She seemed a lot more capable than he did. She continued to tick off fingers. "You really are a little girl, you damned Que-" her hand had only ticked off five, not the promised ten, when she closed her open hand into a fist and rammed it into James's nose.

There was a loud *crack*.

The boy yelped, his hands came up to cup his now bleeding face. He glared at the girl from above his hands. "You're going to regret this!"

"Well, how exactly are you gonna make me regret kicking your ass? Are you going to tell a teacher?" She took a step towards him. "Tell them the new girl beat you up before class? A girl who's four inches shorter than you and barely weighs over a hundred pounds. If the teachers believe you you'll never live it down when the rest school finds out."

She looked back at Will. "I think you could do that right? Let everyone know how the big bad bully got his ass kicked by a girl."

She raised a brow at him when he didn't answer, making him spit out a quick "yes." She took another step towards James who had at this point curled in on himself.

"There's nothing you can really do without making yourself look bad. 'Cause you're damn sure I'm going to tell a teacher what you were doing that made me fight you in the first place."

She stepped right up to him and grabbed a fist full of his shirt. She whispered something to him, something he couldn't hear. James stumbled back, still clutching face as she shoved him back with both hands.

"You're going to regret this!" He headed into the school's back entrance.

"I'd like to see you try!" She called back after him. "Man that felt good." She did a little hop and rolled her neck around, shaking her arms out in front of her. She turned towards Will. "Did you see that Crane Kick? Classic."

Will was frozen in place and had been since the girl had flown in from seemingly nowhere. "What?" She'd stopped jumping around and took a really long look at him. He had to stop himself from fidgeting under her gaze once again. "Who are you?"

"Veronica Her-um," she coughed and cleared her throat. "Veronica Lehane. I just moved here from Indianapolis."

"Oh." He couldn't really think of anything else to say to that. He just kept playing the fight over in his head. "How did you do all that?"

"Hmm?" She'd been distracted. She dropped to her knees and started to help pick up his things. Will quickly followed. "What? The fighting? I, uh, took a couple of defense classes from Faith back home." She'd stopped moving, her hand had tensed around one of his notebooks.

"Faith? Is that your sister? I have an older brother Jonathan, he's taught me a few things but nothing like that." Jonathan had tried to teach him the basics. Protect the face. Hands up. Thumb tucked under the fist not in it. "I wasn't very good at it."

He'd thrown a punch at his brother when prompted and nearly sprained his wrist. He was really skinny. He'd had no power behind his punch, but what little power he did have just ended up hurting himself. His mother had gotten mad at Jonathan. He wasn't allowed to show him anymore.

"No." Her head was low, her eyes on her hands as she neatly piled up his supplies. "Um, kind of. She was someone that took care of me when my guardians died. I'd already knew how to fight, but she made a point of showing me the Crane Kick. It's from a movie."

"Did she come here with you?" He'd finished dusting off his bag. He'd have to stop by the bathroom or the water fountain to see if he could clean off some of the grass stains. Maybe this Faith could teach him a thing or two about fighting.

"No. She's gone." She handed him back his notebooks and binders. He took them from her and placed them in his open backpack. She sat back on her heels and sat there watching him put his things away. He kept seeing her fist connect with James's face in his thoughts.

"Why'd you do it?" This was something that had been bothering him in the back of his mind. "No one has ever stood up to them before."

"Does this happen a lot?" She'd avoided the question. Her voice was hard when she asked her own in return.

"Not really. James and his friend Troy, they like to pick on my friends and I. I don't really know why, but they're a year older than us so we don't even have any classes together. It's usually not this bad and I'm usually not alone." He was lying.

Maybe she could tell that he wasn't telling the whole truth because her eyes stared into him a while before he spoke again. "He won't tell a teacher, but he'll tell the other kids that your a freak or something. No one will want to talk to you. They'll either be too afraid of James and Troy, or they'll think your a freak too."

"That's okay. I'm a bit of a lone wolf anyway. I don't care what a bunch of people I don't know think about me." They were silent as they finished packing up all his stuff.

"I don't like people who hurt others for no reason. I don't like bullies." She reached over and picked up a book they had both missed. It was his *Dungeons Master Rulebook*. He'd been planning to bring it to Mike, so they could play the new revised version of the game. She brushed off some dirt from the pages and smoothed her hand across the cover. "I guess you could say I'm like a, uh, Paladin who's sworn an Oath of Vengeance."

"You know D&D?"

"Yeah, I know D&D. Um, here." She handed him the book and rocked back onto her feet in a graceful movement. "I have to check in with the office and get my books and stuff. But I'll see you around." And with that she was gone.

And Will was left by himself unsure of what he thought about the whole situation that just went down. He'd noticed that other students had flooded the yard while they'd been talking. He picked himself off the grass when he heard his name being called.

"Hey, Will!" He turned to see Mike and Lucas already walking his way, and Dustin parking his bike at the same rack where he'd left his own.

"Hey!" He ran up to them, swinging his backpack across his shoulders. Dustin caught up with them too. "You guys will never believe what just happened."

"I'm sorry I still don't believe you."

It was lunchtime and the Party had stopped by their lockers to switch out their books for their lunches. Will didn't mention how James Dante had destroyed his. He just told the others that he wasn't hungry when he exchanged his books for the ones he'd need for his later classes.

Dustin was the only one who didn't believe Will when he told the others about what had happened. Mike believed in Will wholeheartedly and Lucas sort of believed him, he thought Will had exaggerated the skill level Veronica had displayed. Dustin had denied the whole thing. "It was believable until you said she liked D&D, now I know you were just imagining the whole thing."

They'd gathered around a table near the back of the school, close to track field. Everyone else usually gathered in the cafeteria or the basketball courts. So they were mostly alone, there were a few groups spread about but none of them would bother the boys. None of them were Troy and James's group.

"I'm not lying!" He really wasn't. "She came in and totally kicked the

crap out of him. You saw him in the hall after second period! He had a swollen nose and everything!" James did have a swollen nose. It was also starting to bruise around one side by his eye too, and his nostrils had been crusted with dried blood.

Lucas decided to chime in at that point. "Yeah, I saw that too." He nodded his head sagely before taking a large bite out of the sandwich he'd brought for lunch.

Will's stomach growled as he watched his friends eat. "I think we'll have to see her for ourselves first though." He talked with food in his mouth, it all came out muffled and distorted but Will was used to this habit of his by now. He understood.

Will had been disappointed earlier when he and his friends had spent the beginning of their first period looking for a new girl that would never arrive. She wasn't in any of their other classes either.

Mike had suggested that maybe she was in the year above or below them. Will thought that she was probably in eighth grade. She was tiny like him, but something about her seemed older.

He'd kept an eye out in the hallways between classes but he hadn't seen her again.

"We'll just keep an eye out, right guys?" Mike had voiced Will's own thoughts. He was good at that. "And we just have to make sure we get to the bike rack early. In case we don't see her before school ends." He looked directly at Will then. "You did say she parked her bike near ours right?"

Will found himself nodding.

"Then we meet her there." Mike went back to picking at his own food.

Will was about to open his mouth and ask if he could have some of Mike's chips when he was suddenly kicked in the shin. Dustin was sitting in front of him. So he was the culprit.

"Hey!" Dustin waves his hand around in Will's face.

"What?!" Will smacked the boy across the back of his wrist. And

shoved his arm out of his face.

"Black pants, dark red sweater, and boots!" Dustin then pointed over Will's shoulder. "We don't need to find her, she's walking towards us!"

Will whipped around to find that Veronica was indeed walking towards their table with a lunch tray in her hands and her backpack hanging from one shoulder strap.

"Stop pointing, you idiot!" Lucas, tugged Dustin's arm down, but Will was sure that she had already seen anyway.

"What do we do?!" Dustin yelled.

"I don't know. Maybe not act like total spazzes?" Mike looked over at the girl too but then just went back to eating.

"Right. Right. Eat. Ignore the girl that just beat the shit out of James Dante. Sure." Dustin went back to his pudding cup and was really subtle about *not* looking at the girl as she approached. *Smooth*.

"Hey." Veronica had reached their table at that point. Will greeted her back with an awkward wave. She gave a quick half smile in response, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. She eyed his friends warily.

"Veronica these are my friends." He pointed them out as he went. "Mike, Lucas, and Dustin." They each gave her a wave and some greeting or other. Dustin leaned into the table with his elbow, he rested his head in his hand and gave the girl a wide gummy smile and an eyebrow wiggle.

Veronica's lips twitched a bit but she didn't actually smile in response. She nodded at the group before turning to face Will himself. "I didn't get your name earlier either."

Mike leaned into Will, so Veronica could see him too. "He's Will." She nodded in thanks.

"Well, Will. I remembered how that asshole ruined your lunch so I thought I'd bring you this." She bent down to slide the tray in front of him. On the tray was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a carton of orange juice, and a cup of pudding. "I went with the safest choice.

They were serving some weird looking thing that was supposed to be meat, I think." She crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned back.

"You didn't have to! No, I can't take this." He pushed the tray back her way. "You should eat it." She stopped the tray with a single finger.

"I know I didn't have to. I wanted to. And I already have a lunch. So keep it, or I'll just toss it in the trash anyway."

"Thanks." He pulled the tray back in front of him. He didn't like charity. His friends knew that sometimes his mother struggled with money and that he couldn't really afford to buy certain things. They always tried to get him to let them pay for things but he didn't let them often. He may have been poor, and weak, but he had to have some kind of pride to his name.

He was really hungry though so he accepted the tray.

"No problem. I'm gonna head off and go find a spot to eat, but I'll see you guys around."

"No don't go!" That was Dustin, Who no doubt wanted to grill her on her supposed fighting skill and D&D knowledge. Everyone turned to look at him and he sunk down in his seat at the stares.

"Yeah, it's no problem. You can sit with us if you want. We have room." Mike as the de facto Party leader was the one to extend the invitation. Will looked up at Veronica with a bit of hope in his eyes.

"Thanks for the invite but no thanks. I'd like to get in a bit of alone time." She looked to Will. "Lone wolf. Remember?"

Will watched her leave, but she paused first and turned back to them. "What character class are you, Will?"

"I'm a Cleric." Will wasn't sure why she wanted to know. Veronica stared at him for a second and nodded her head as if his answer had meant something more important than what he'd said.

"See you later, Will the Wise." She made a little gesture with her hand

as if casting a spell. She pulled on the headphones she'd had hanging around her neck. "Let me know if you need a Paladin's help dealing with anymore stray Kobolds." And then she made her way into the track field and up the bleachers designated to the opposing school, all the way across the other side of the field, away from them. He couldn't see what she was doing, only that she'd sat under the shade of a tree by the benches. All the way at the top.

The party was silent in her departure.

"Okay so I was wrong, she does know her D&D."

5. Chapter 5

Trigger warning: implied child abuse

Cardross Scotland, June 8, 2002

"Yes, now I want you to concentrate on this next part. You've been able to summon concentrated sunlight for a few weeks already but today I'd like you to expand on that, quite literally. Expand the range of the rays, see how bright you can make it. This spell will serve you well when fighting off Vampires."

Veronica watched as Margaret stood up from her seat at the end of the table and went straight for the whiteboard in the far corner of the room. Veronica watched her Watcher wheel the board over so that it was just across the table from the Potential. The woman picked up a marker and circled a few phrases on the board with enthusiasm.

"Meditation and Concentration." She read each phrase aloud as she circled the words with red. "Core Manipulation." She leaned over to the unmarked section of the board and wrote down her next phrase. "Magical Intent." The Watcher recapped the marker and dropped it down onto the desk that separated her from the young Witch.

She looked down at the ball of light hovering between the girl's two hands. The woman leaned over the desk, palms flat against the dark wood and smiled down at her charge. The glow from the orb of light cast a golden sheen over the woman's features. "You have a rare type of magic, Veronica. And I think it's finally time that we begin to hone these special abilities that you possess. Don't you?"

They'd been focusing on the theoretical side of magic for the past two months. Different classes of magic, magic users and power sources and the differences between them, the strengths and weaknesses. Theories on changing spell outcomes without having to physically change the spell itself.

Veronica understood the concept of what her Watcher wanted her to do, she just wasn't sure she would be able to do it. Margaret Price had been training the young Potential in witchcraft for the past year.

The woman wasn't a Witch herself, but she had studied Magical Theory for the last decade of her life. The woman had worked with multiple covens across the globe in different branches of magic and specialties.

The training started with basic spell casting. She'd already learned about brewing and magical artifacts from Watcher Blake but the man wasn't as knowledgeable in the magical aspects as Margaret was. The man could have easily taught an average Potential all she needed to know, but he was fairly ill prepared for one that was also a Witch. Therefore the Council thought it best if a different Watcher take over Veronica's magical education, while the regular Slayer training continued with Blake.

The first few months were all about memorizing spells and hand movements, combining the power of the spells with artifacts, rituals or runes and a lot of practice.

So much practice.

Both magical *and* physical.

Watcher Blake didn't seem to like the fact that he'd been asked to back off the magical side of her training. He never voiced his feelings, he was too proud. Instead Veronica's physical training was doubled in intensity. She was pushed to run faster and longer, fight faster and better, hours on end until he was satisfied. And he never was.

The magical training also wore her out. It both physically and magically exhausted her. Margaret never pushed Veronica too hard. She always stopped the sessions when Veronica energy seemed to wane.

Blake had no qualms about pushing Veronica past her limits. Often he would seek her out after her sessions with Margaret and make her spar before bed.

Veronica didn't fall asleep most nights, instead she would pass out as soon as she made it to her bed. The exhaustion would claim her before she wanted it to.

The Potential ate like mad in order to keep up with all the training. She assumed that it was some kind of increased durability as a Potential or a Witch that kept her going.

She knew that she couldn't keep it up for much longer. She could feel the ache in her arms even then as she cradled the ball of light in her hands.

She was tired. She'd been tired for the past year, but she could take the exhaustion that raked her body so long as she was able to keep using her powers. The magic lessons were one of the few things in her life that she actually enjoyed.

The power that flowed through her veins and swelled within her chest always made her feel warm. As close to happy as she'd ever been.

She was tired, but ready to try out what they'd been discussing for the past week.

"Yes. I think I'm ready." Veronica gave the older woman a tentative nod.

"Good. I thought so. It's why I came prepared." The Watcher reached into her blazer and pulled out two pairs of sunglasses.

She smiled as she leaned over to slip a pair over the girl's face, making sure they were secured behind her ears and then slipping on her own.

"Okay so let's begin."

—

Hawkins Indiana, August 19th, 1983

Veronica had never really had many friends.

While under the original Watchers Council she only ever really interacted with Watchers. When she was younger she would train with other young Potentials but they never even spoke to each other. Their Watchers made sure that the contact between the girls was

limited to sparring matches only. The closest thing she'd had to a conversation to a child her age had been when they traded blows. A warcry here, a grunt there. That was it.

Her time spent with the Devon Coven had been the first time she'd been in the company of someone that wasn't directly under the Council's domain. She'd spent about a week with the Coven, learning what they were willing to teach her before Giles had come to them for help searching out the other Potentials.

He'd been surprised to find a Potential already in their care, but took it in stride as they both headed out to find the others before the Harbingers found them. Giles had been rattled at having such a young travel partner but found common ground in the few novels he'd taken with him on his trip. Veronica had spent most of the time before Sunnydale reading the novels he'd brought along, finding the pages a lot more interesting than the girls they'd picked up on the way.

Looking back now, Veronica could see that she had been the one that had put up barriers first. The older Potentials had been unfocused and whiny, but it wasn't their fault. They'd been ripped from their homes, told that they were in danger and meant to save the world, and left in the hands of strangers. It was all new to them, even the ones that had had Watchers before. They'd been trained, but they didn't live and breathe under the Watchers Council's eyes. For Veronica it was all old news, been there and done that. She was just bitter that the other girls had more freedom than she'd had. That they had people who seemed to care about their wellbeing training them for battle. She'd found their attitude ungrateful and unappreciative of what they had compared to what they could have had. What Veronica endured for ten years.

Faith had understood that bitter part of her, had recognized it from the beginning. Faith had a similar relationship with Buffy. Faith knew where Veronica was coming from and that allowed the young Potential to open up to her in a way that she'd never allowed herself to with others. Veronica could tell that Faith had a hard and dark past, she could sense it like Faith sensed hers. Like called to like.

Faith had been Veronica's only confidant. She'd found friends in the

others, what little of them she'd actually allowed to befriend her. But she could literally count the number of people she considered friends on both hands and still have fingers left to spare.

But that was back in her old world.

Here she was more open to friendly acquaintances. She had friends in the sense that she had people that she had allowed to talk to her. She never allowed them to breach her inner walls though. Never allowed them to breach the surface of her true self.

She hadn't expected to allow anyone close here in Hawkins either. But she wasn't in a big city anymore. She couldn't hide by herself in the crowd. Her tendency towards being a loner would single her out in a way she didn't need at the moment. This was the place where it was all going to go down. She didn't need to be a Cordy, she just needed to be somewhere the original Scoobies ranked. Connected enough to be in the know when anything weird was going on and unacknowledged enough to be ignored when she was the one doing weird stuff.

She wasn't allowed the chance though because she'd been blacklisted before she'd even stepped foot into her first class.

Veronica had been enrolled at Hawkins Middle for less than a week. That first day had set the president of how her social life in Hawkins would play out. To say it was lacking would be an understatement.

No one talked to her. Yes, she was grateful to be spared the effort. But it sort of ruined her plan to stay below the radar.

Teachers tended to take notice when a student is singled out by the entire eighth grade class. And she did mean the *entire class*. No one spoke to her. They all actively avoided her during class and breaks.

One girl actually dropped a pencil and when Veronica leaned over to pick it up and give it back to her she acted like the Slayer wasn't even there. She just sat staring straight ahead, hands balled up into fists as the kids behind them looked on. The girl ended up missing out on taking notes for the rest of that class because she wouldn't accept Veronica's gesture and also refused to ask anyone else.

That was dedication.

She was impressed by the pull that the Neanderthal actually had. When he said that he could make her regret her actions he actually meant it. Too bad she actually didn't give a fuck whether these kids liked her or not.

She was impressed by the effort they took to keep the whole thing going. Whether they avoided her out of spite, solidarity or fear, it didn't matter. Sure, it would make group projects awkward, but it was no skin off her back.

It would have been easier to float somewhere in between, more convenient, but not a necessity. She could play the role of social outcast, a violent one at that. She could pull off the Bender look. She did have a plaid shirt in her closet, maybe she could make herself a pair of fingerless gloves.

The point was, she didn't regret her actions.

She despised bullies and abusers. She hated them with a passion. It reminded her of her time under Watcher Blake and how weak she had been. How she never fought back.

So, yes. She'd fight James Dante again if she could have a do over. Though she would definitely take the time to break something besides his nose though. She wished she hadn't pulled her punches quite so much.

Will and his friends made it a point to seek her out during the breaks. She felt guilty but she avoided them the best she could.

Will seemed like a sweet kid. His friends too. She just knew that he was going to be involved in some supernatural type stuff soon. She had to get a read on him and the situation first.

Veronica, on that first day of school, had hesitated. It was something that she was actively trained not to do. She never hesitated. She was the one that jumped into action at a moments notice. It was Slayer intuition and the lifelong training that had her always at the ready for whatever life threw at her.

She had seen the asshole push Will to the ground.

She'd jumped off her bike and made to jump in and save the boy before anything even happened. It was a Slayer's instinct to protect those who need protecting. But she actively stopped herself from storming in to save the day.

She needed to know who this boy was, what his role in what was coming would be and what he was capable of.

Veronica knew that something supernatural lived within Hawkins. She needed to see if this boy was what she had detected on the map. If the bully attacked him and he was somehow stopped in an odd mystical way, then she would at least know if the boy had some powers.

Will didn't stop the attack. He hunched in on himself under the bully's attention, he flinched at every move the older boy made. And it made her physically sick to just stand there and watch. So she stepped in and defended him.

He wasn't really hurt. He'd just been dragged around a little, pushed a couple of times. It wasn't that bad.

She had vivid flashbacks of Watcher Blake tearing apart her room during routine inspections and how he would grab her by the chin or the back of her neck with tight bruising fingers.

Not that bad my ass.

She tried to justify her actions in telling herself that at least she now knew that Will was just a normal boy.

She fought with herself all morning until noon.

She'd decided to buy him lunch to make up for her earlier hesitation and create an opportunity to do one last check.

She could hear them before she even saw them. It was her Slayer ability but amplified a little with her magic. She upped the power as soon as she left the cafeteria, weeding through the chatter and keeping an ear out for Will Byers in particular.

She heard a mention of DnD and zoned in on the sounds in that area. She could hear Will's voice arguing with his friends. Apparently there was doubt in the encounter, and of her DnD knowledge which was random. She shut down the super ears and headed toward the direction she'd heard the voices.

When meeting his friends she pretended like she didn't know his name either, though she'd actually gotten a really good look at his class schedule so she actually knew his first and last name, date of birth and school ID number.

While talking to them she decided to do her final check. She hid the glow of her eyes with a slow blink and cast a small glamour over her eyes, making sure that they still looked brown to everyone else.

Her magic was often an extension of herself. In this world it had to be. There was no magic in the air or earth, only within herself. So she'd had to learn to really hone her powers. The lessons with her Watchers really helped in figuring out how to push the magic from her body, sometimes to affect the physical realm and other times the metaphysical.

Souls, magic, auras and energy. These things were metaphysical. There but not *here*. Real but intangible until one willed it so.

She pushed her magic outward, invisible smokey fingers of gold extended out and wrapped around Will. They coiled around his form and sunk into his skin searching for and finding his core. Which surprised her.

Everyone living has a soul, even gingers and even some vampires. But not everyone had a magical core. All supernatural beings had magical cores: Slayers, Demons, Witches, etc. But it was actually quite rare for normal humans to have one. Those who did were usually Witches but some never possessed the ability to become one, not fully anyway. They were just magically inclined. Sensitive. Mediums.

Will had a magical core, but definitely one incapable of actual magic. His core was small and translucent, just barely there, almost on the verge of nonexistent. He wasn't a Warlock or anything but he might have been a Medium.

Her magic brushed against his core. Will visibly shivered but it didn't really register with him. He was definitely sensitive to her magic. He looked at her with open honest eyes. She liked to think that she was good at reading people. He could feel her magic when it brushed his, but he was definitely unaware of its existence.

She'd decided to leave now that she'd gotten her answers and eased her conscience. She'd turned down the offer to eat with them but couldn't resist asking Will what his DnD character was.

She'd chosen the Paladin because it felt the closest to who she was as a Slayer and a Witch. She wondered how accurate Will's own character was to what she knew him to be.

Cleric.

Was that his sensitivity? His magic unconsciously declaring itself? Sometimes Veronica just knew things. It was the intuition that came with being both a Slayer and a Witch. Like the way animals knew to migrate or birds to fly. Will's alter ego was a magic user because he unconsciously knew that that was true.

She dropped a few more DnD bombs before she left. She did know the game, at least enough to play, and she didn't like when her abilities were doubted.

She needed to scry for that magic source now that she knew it wasn't Will. His essence was too weak to ping on the map like the one from the night before, there was still something else out there. And she had to find out what.

The rest of the week she'd declined the offers she received from he and his friends to sit with them. Veronica honestly preferred the bleachers and sitting alone, but the disappointment in his face and the curiosity in his friends' made her almost want to say yes.

It seemed even the years below her had also taken notice of her new found social pariah status. The younger years sort of looked at Veronica in fear. Apparently the rumors that spread were a lot more vicious than what actually happened.

The Slayer had overheard some interesting takes on the incident and what had actually happened. There were rumors that Veronica had pulled a knife out on the bully, or that she had just attacked him for no reason at all, or that she just flew at him in a rage shouting in Spanish or tongues or something.

Yes, Veronica was most definitely capable of doing whatever they all accused her of, but it wasn't like she was going to do any of that stuff at school. Not on the first day, at least.

She just saw something in Will that needed protecting.

She could see the kindness Will, and the vulnerability too. And she could tell that it was all genuine. She decided that he wasn't what was coming, he wouldn't be the cause of it at least. She assumed he was probably just going to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Either that or targeted because he was magically inclined.

Veronica imagined Will going up against a Vampire, or a Werewolf, or a Haxil Beast. It wasn't hard to imagine the carnage that would ensue.

She'd just have to put a stop to whatever was coming before it got to him.

This led her to semi-stalking Will Byers for the rest of that first week.

Afterschool he biked to a friend's house, all of the boys did. She rode back to Marianne's not long after getting to these homes, she didn't want to be caught by the neighbors or the boys. She also didn't want to raise any suspicions with Marianne.

Three different houses in three different days. None of them his. She knew this because she'd never seen an older teenage boy in any of these houses. Will had told Veronica that he had an older brother.

On the fourth day of school, and her fourth day of being a creep, Will was dropped off at school by said brother in an old Ford. She couldn't follow the car without either falling behind or being seen in the car's mirrors. So she just rode home that day.

Which brought her to today.

Will decided to ride home by himself. She followed him at a distance. He rode down Cornwallis and stopped where the street met Kerley. Veronica could see Marianne's place from where she was, Will was straddling his bike just a few feet from where she slept.

He looked both ways at the stop sign before hopping back on. Veronica thought he was probably going to continue down Cornwallis because she knew he didn't live on the same street as she did.

He didn't.

Instead he turned onto a path where the two met. One that was sometimes gated off. He rode straight into the forest. And in the direction she knew that concentration of magic lay.

She'd repeated the little ritual a few times over the course of the past four days. Her sitting alone at lunch came in handy for this reason. Each time the grains tainted with her blood would pool in the same exact spot on the map. It didn't matter the time of day or day of the week. The energy was always in the same exact spot.

The part of the forest that Will just rode into.

Veronica didn't follow him.

Instead she laid her bike by the side of the road, not far from her own window. She walked to the gate, letting her fingers glide across the gaps in the wire as she made her way to the farthest side where the foliage was thick.

Veronica stopped at a few branches blocking a portion of the chain links. She quickly pushed them aside to see two signs strapped down to the gate.

HNL

Hawkins National Laboratory

U.S. Department of Energy

Restricted Area

No Trespassing

U.S. Government Property

"It's the government. It's always the fucking government."

Veronica ran back to her bike, and let herself into Marianne's. The woman was gone at the moment, Veronica wasn't sure where.

She flew through the house and stopped at her desk. She riffled through the drawer and pulled out the map she'd borrowed from Marianne's dining room shelves.

She found Kerley on the map, found Cornwallis, but couldn't find the road that Will had just rode down. She couldn't find a Lab or any sort of landmark within that area of the forest either.

Her map was out of date.

Rookie mistake.

The map had been torn along a single side, and apparently that side had held the date of creation.

She remembered him and his friends coming from the same road the day she first saw him, her very first day in Hawkins. She'd been so focused on the *pull* and Will that she hadn't really bothered with their surroundings.

Her lack of vigilance aside, the road wasn't on the map. So she guessed it was where she would start her search. She wouldn't have the time to find an updated map without raising questions. So she decided she was going in blind.

Veronica emptied out her backpack on the bed, spilling her books and pens all over the blue comforter. She grabbed the mason jar on her dresser, the red salt crystals for her ritual hidden in plain sight. She packed that in her bag, along with a bottle of water and a few other things she'd thought she might need.

She ran outside hopped onto her bike and rode down that same unnamed path that Will did.

Veronica was able to follow the road until she found what she was looking for. She'd reached a hill in the road and once she reached the top she found the lab. The building was huge, maybe six stories high, in the shape of a giant 'x'. It was surrounded by barbed wire gates and forest, there was nothing around for another half mile or so probably. There were tanks and satellites everywhere and that was just from what she could see.

It probably had a giant underground secret basement where all the experiments happened. Demon summoning, robo-demon engineering, human sacrifices, animal testing. All that good stuff.

The red salt grains were in her bag but she didn't need them. She *knew* that this was the place. She could *feel* it.

Power. *Magic*. Rolling across her skin, sending a shiver down her spine. It was almost like being in the presence of another Witch.

It wasn't Will. She'd watched him ride past the building with ease. Veronica assumed he lived somewhere beyond the woods that surrounded this place. Besides the fact that this power felt too strong to be Will, this feeling wasn't the usual ache in the pit of her stomach that she always felt in his presence. It wasn't that *pull* from Death or the Powers or whatever.

This was raw magic. A powerful Witch or Warlock.

And they were actively using their magic for something. Veronica could feel the magic pulse and flare out from wherever the source was in the building. It was like some kind of radar. Flaring out. Reaching. Searching.

And the young Slayer-Witch could feel her magic swell in response.

Whoever this was, they were powerful. That or they were using some sort of ritual or object to amplify their power. But this wasn't her old world. There wasn't gems and artifacts lying around soaked in mystical energy ready to be used. This person was Willow level powerful.

Veronica eyed the huge satellite dishes that littered the roof of the compound.

But then again, they were in a government laboratory. It wouldn't be the first time science had meddled where it shouldn't. Maybe they were testing the extent of someone's or something's powers. Experimenting on a magical being or artifact. Using these monster satellites to amplify that reach.

The Witch tightened her hands on the handlebars of her bike. Her eyes glowed gold and a burst of her own magic left her. She willed her magic to seek out that source of power she'd been feeling. She felt it push outward, toward the lab. And then down, *way down*.

She couldn't see the inside of the building or even the path her magic took. She could just *feel* the essence of herself, of her magic, and feel its movement as it searched. She could feel it rush forward and turn and fall with every room it came upon and every floor it descended, it was like being on a rollercoaster; her gut tingled with every sharp move her magic took.

And then she found it.

That thing that she'd tracked on the map, and felt pulse against her skin just a few minutes earlier.

It wasn't an object like she had secretly hoped. It was a person. She could *feel* their presence. Feel her magical core, really. And it *was* a 'her'. And she was young. And cold. And scared.

Veronica willed her magic further. She wanted to *know* this powerful being. Know what she was feeling and what she was casting. Her magic brushed across the girl's core.

She saw her golden wisps of magic caressing a core of blue and green. It was all metaphysical but she knew it was real. The cloudy tendrils of blue and green magic, like living ocean water reaching for her own sunlit magic.

They connected.

And another wave of magic poured out from the building. This time

it was like a literal wave. Veronica staggered off the seat of her bike. Cold washed over her, and she felt the sting of pain and fear wash over her. Panic bloomed in her chest. Not from her but from the girl in the lab.

She could feel the girl's panic and fear from where she stood. Veronica opened her eyes, just realizing that she had closed them in the process of her metaphysical search. And when she opened them she saw nothing but blackness.

Where she stood in the middle of the road on the hill above the lab, was not what she saw. There was no lab in the distance. No woods around her. No fading sun beyond the tree line.

Veronica could feel the bike's handles beneath her hands but she could see nothing but darkness around her.

She was seeing what the girl saw, she was in her head. She'd wanted to know what the girl's magic was doing. Now she was seeing it through the girl's own eyes.

Growling and clicking rang through the darkness. The girl's head swung to find the source of the sound. Veronica's own head stayed in place. It was an odd sensation to have her vision blur and her view shift without physically moving her own head or eyes.

There was nothing but blackness. Animalistic gurgling broke a moment of silence. The girl took a couple steps back. Black water was revealed at her feet, cold and licking across her bare ankles.

Whatever was in the darkness moved closer. Veronica could hear the water splash in its wake. It growled and whined. It was like something out of an alien movie.

Or something out of a Hellmouth.

The girl bolted. Veronica didn't get a chance to see the thing that lurked in the dark void. But she knew it was a demon. The girl ran and Veronica tightened her hold on her bike, anchoring herself to her physical body as her mind explored the girl's.

The growling was getting louder. Veronica could feel the panic and

fear rise. The girl had been scared when she'd heard what was in the dark, but as it chased after her it became unbearable.

Veronica heard her heartbeat loud in her ears, and at this point she wasn't sure if it was hers or the girl's. Her breath came short and she wanted to run herself, but she locked her body tight, not wanting to run off into the forest blindly as her mind ran from the demon with the girl.

It was all so confusing. She couldn't tell the difference between herself and the girl. Was it her fear? The girl's panic? Both? Neither? She needed out.

She tried to focus through the confusing tangle of emotions and thoughts. She gathered her magic. Those wisps of golden light that had fused with the girl's cool core and *pulled*.

She could hear the girl's screams. She could see that she was no longer in that dark void. But she was now surrounded by water. Murky water, bubbling from the thrashing and screams. She wasn't sure whose screams they were.

She was still in the girl's mind.

Veronica yanked at her magic again as they both screamed. White hot pain shot through her head. Like someone was driving a stake through her skull.

Their cores had wrapped themselves around each other, their individual auras of magic creating a beautiful marblesque orb. Separating the two halves was painful. They clung to each other as she pulled.

As she detangled their minds the connection between them was still open. Some of the girl's thoughts filtered through to Veronica along with the emotions. It was all garbled Russian and English she couldn't make out most of it. The only thing she could make out was one word repeated over and over until Veronica finally pulled free completely.

Papa!

Veronica snapped back into her own body. She dropped the bike and opened her eyes to bright lights. She screamed, or she continued to scream. She didn't think she'd ever stopped screaming in sync with the girl in the lab.

She threw her hands up to block out the blinding lights.

Cardross Scotland, July 10, 2002

"Brilliant, Veronica. Absolutely brilliant!" Her Watcher laughed with glee as she stood behind her, watching as Veronica shot beams of sunlight from her hands. The rays were so bright that the two were both wearing solar viewing glasses to shield from the brightness and possible radiation. Her Watcher was even wearing a special vest to block out radiation.

Over the course of the last month the two had made great progress with the sun spell. Veronica was now able to manipulate the spell in a multitude of ways: summoning a ball of light, manipulating the shape and reach of the light, generating heat, increasing the intensity.

There'd been several different experiments but this one was actually kind of exciting to the Potential. Veronica was projecting powerful rays at different panels designed to absorb different frequencies of light while her Watcher went around the room with a thermometer and a radiation detector.

They'd been going at it for about two hours. Testing the limits of her control. Raising and lowering the temperature and radiation levels. Testing her focus and concentration while holding the spell. And seeing how long she could keep it going.

It was reaching the ten minute mark.

Her heart was beating fast and she felt warm all over. Not *hot* as in she was boiling her insides- *it was a legitimate fear*- but like she'd just run a mile in the middle of the night.

She looked like she'd just ran a mile. Sweat made her curls stick to her face and the nape of her neck. Her breathing was starting to

become ragged and her limbs were beginning to tremble.

She didn't know how much longer she could hold it for.

"Amazing! Absolutely no detection of radiation output or rise in temperature. It's as if you're doing nothing at all. You've really gotten a handle on your control."

The praise almost made Veronica want to smile. Almost being the operative word. Though she liked Margaret enough, and the woman was kind to her, she knew that she could never trust the woman completely.

Margaret Price saw the bruises that littered her body. She noticed the way she'd half drag herself upstairs to bed every night. She knew why Veronica's face would suddenly go blank and her speech became monosyllabic when her fellow Watcher entered the same room as them.

Veronica noticed that the woman made sure to be extra kind to her after she'd witness proof of Blake's malice. But she also noticed that the woman hardly lost any sleep over what she saw on a daily basis.

She knew that Blake hated the girl but she knew that there was nothing that she could do.

She was considered a Junior Watcher. The only reason that she'd been assigned to a Potential was because Veronica was special. Margaret just happened to write her dissertation on Magical Theory and had a degree in several science fields that tied in with the subject.

But at the rate the Veronica was progressing she wouldn't need much guidance in the magical portion of her training for long.

Margaret knew that she reported to Blake. He was a senior Watcher and had trained several Slayers previously. Successful Slayers. He was trusted by the Council. He was a traditionalist. And he made sure to only physically harm her while they were on the sparring mat.

Margaret couldn't claim abuse when it was hidden behind training, Veronica knew that. She still wished that the woman would interfere.

But she knew that she couldn't, not without losing her position.

And of course her job was more important than the well being of a child.

No. Veronica wasn't bitter about it at all. The only reason the young Witch even remotely agreed with Margaret's silence was that if the woman was fired Veronica would be alone with Blake again.

The Witch didn't want that. Not at all. So she accepted Margaret's kindness with a grain of salt.

Veronica shook her head, trying to physically clear her mind of her thoughts. The brightness of the beams had dimmed a bit due to her lack of focus. "I don't think I can hold it for much longer."

Veronica could see her Watcher fiddle with the strap around her neck. "Alright, you're right. I think that's enough for today." Veronica reigned in her power, letting the sunlight sleep back into her palms. She let her arms drop as soon as her Watcher gave her the okay.

"Beautiful. That is the longest one so far." She took the stopwatch from around her neck and showed the screen to the girl.

15:38.07

"Fifteen minutes and thirty eight seconds." The woman slipped out of the vest and began to fiddle with the monitors connected with the panels they'd used as targets. "I'll go over the data tomorrow morning."

Veronica took the time to wipe the sweat off her face. She grabbed a water bottle from the table in the corner and poured half the thing down her throat and the rest across her head. The chill of the water cooled down her flushed skin and quenched a thirst she didn't even know she had.

She grabbed the towel she'd brought down with her and patted her face dry. The towel was plush. It reminded her of her blankets. She couldn't wait to go to bed.

"Veronica?"

The Potential pulled the cloth away from her face so she could see her Watcher. "Yes?" The woman had set everything down on the table next to Veronica's things.

"I just wanted to say that I'm proud of your progress. This was all just theoretical. Witches three times your age couldn't even dream of attempting the things that your doing right now. You'll be ready to use this out in the field in no time at all."

"That's good to hear." Both women froze at the sound of a third voice. They both looked toward the stairs to see Watcher Blake standing at the bottom of the steps.

"Why is that?" Margaret turned to fully face the man as Veronica turned her back to them both.

"Excellent question, Watcher Price." Veronica could hear his trademark Oxfords tap against the concrete floor as he made his way further into the room. "It seems that there are Vampires in town."

Veronica could feel her whole body go tense.

No.

She wasn't ready yet. Sure she had the spell down but that didn't mean that she was ready to actually put it in action. She was ten. *Ten*. How was she supposed to fight off a real life Vampire and survive? And he'd actually said 'Vampires'. *Plural*.

"You can't mean that!" Margaret shouted at the man. "She hasn't- she can't! We haven't tested her ability to perform the spell under pressure yet! And- and there are too many variables unknown! We need to see whether she is capable of casting during a fight! How she does with moving targets, multiple targets! No! She- we need more time."

"Well we don't have any time left. There have been four bodies found, completely drained of blood and experienced post-mortem tearing at the jugular. The victims were all abducted not too far from each other, meaning that they were most likely attacked near the Vampires' feeding ground. Four bodies in two nights and those are

just the ones they found missing in Cardross. I haven't even checked the body count from Argyll or Bute." Blake's whole speech sounded like a sneer, she could picture his scowling face narrowing his eyes at her turned back.

A hand clamped down onto her shoulder. Roughly. "We leave in an hour. I believe they're hiding out in St. Peter's Seminary. The place is exposed to light during the day, no walls, so I don't believe they're nesting there. It's just where they like to feed. We go now while we know where they are."

There was more arguing about the pros and cons but Veronica blocked it all out. She knew she was going regardless of what Margaret said. The woman wasn't in charge here. Blake was. And he'd already made up his mind.

"I'll do it." Both of the adults stopped fighting with each other and turned to stare at her. "There's no other choice, right?" She looked the man dead in the eye. "I'm going to die anyway right? A painful and cruel death? Might as well be now. Get it over with."

This would be the first time she'd put any of her training to actual use. She wasn't sure she'd survive the experience. But Veronica would fight with all she had. Of that she was sure.

Blake matched up the stairs and went off to prepare the car for the hunt. Veronica stayed behind with the female Watcher as she watched him go.

"You don't have to do this. There is no way he ran this by the Council. I can call them and-" Margaret reached out to the girl to calm her, console her, whatever. Veronica wasn't going to let that happen.

"Don't bloody touch me!" She flinched back from the woman's hand. "You can't do shit!" She practically spit the words at the shocked Watcher.

"I'm only trying to help you." The woman held her hands out in front of her, placating the girl.

"Yeah, well don't. You only make things worse. You see how he takes it out on me when you try to help. I can see the guilt in you eyes every time you see a bruise or a cut. You coddling me only makes it worse. How fucking niave can you be?!"

"Hey! Don't talk to me like that." The woman pointed her finger in the girl's face, a reprimand.

"Then stop acting like a child. Your actions have consequences, consequences that affect others. The bruises that you like to stare so sadly at? Those are the results of your actions. You trying to tell Blake 'no'? Only made him rejoice in his decision even more. But that's fine. I don't need to be coddled by you. I don't need your protection. I'm not a child. I'm a survivor. I've survived ten years with the Devil. A few low level Demons can't beat that. Either I slay these Vampires or I die trying. I win in either scenario."

The woman was speechless. Veronica was wasting time arguing with her anyway. She had a fight to prepare for. She rushed up the stairs but paused at the top step.

"Watcher Price?" The woman looked up at her with wet eyes. Veronica hadn't called her by her official title since the day they'd met. She could tell by the look on her face that the Watcher knew what that meant. The relationship would be professional from there on out.

The older woman cleared her throat before answering the Potential. "Yes, Miss Hernandez?"

"I hope you sleep well tonight."

—

She didn't.

She didn't go to bed at all that night.

Not until the two came back from the hunt. And even then she couldn't find it in her to actually sleep. Not when she kept seeing the image of the Potential reentering the house behind her eyelids.

Dressed in dark clothes from head to toe. Clothes torn all across her body, blood soaking the front of her shirt, or what was left of it. Blood smeared across her face and on her hands. Hair short and uneven and muddy, like it had been viciously hacked off during the fight. A large nasty looking wound at her base of her neck, where her throat met her clavicle. It was half torn and half bubbly like she'd been shredded apart by claws and branded in the same spot.

She looked like she'd just walked out of a massacre. Six Vampires, she'd later learned. The girl had fought off six vampires, only taking out half with the sun spell they'd been practicing. And she'd only used the spell as a last result.

She'd used it to finish them off when they'd had her pinned, quite literally, to the edge of an open stairway dangling head first off the third floor.

But it wasn't even the blood or the wounds that kept her from sleeping. It was the dead look on the girl's face. It wasn't the carefully blank mask she always wore around Watcher Blake, it was just empty. Void of everything that made her Veronica.

It was the dead expression and the bright glowing golden eyes that stared her straight in the eyes.

Those eyes haunted her sleep.

She filed for a relocation not long after the incident.

She wasn't missed.

6. Chapter 6

Hawkins Indiana, August 19th, 1983

Veronica threw her hands up to block out the blinding lights.

There was a screeching of tires, the blare of a horn and the smell of burnt rubber filled her nostrils. A car was coming at her, trying to stop but still driving straight at her.

She threw herself to the side, dived off the road, twisting her body into a somersault and expected a solid landing. She would have stuck the landing, only she was on top of a hill. She rolled down the side, rolling over rocks and branches as she went. Smashing into a tree trunk, she came to a stop.

Owwwwww!

She just laid there, letting her body and mind settle for a moment. Her head stung, but she knew it wasn't from her tumble down the hill.

Her mind hurt, throbbed behind her closed eyes and all through her skull. She'd never done anything like what she'd just done before. She knew that mind reading could be achieved using spells and rituals, artifacts too, but this wasn't just hearing thoughts. She'd seen and felt. It was like she was physically there, wherever *there* was.

She'd been riding passenger inside that girl's body but it wasn't possession. She was in that girl's mind, she couldn't control anything but she experienced everything the girl did. It wasn't something that she'd ever even heard of before.

She was starting to feel like she was in over her head. And she knew that she *was*. She'd never had to deal with a Big Bad on her own. Little baddies, yes. The type that were easily slain on a patrol, no complex plots, no ulterior motives besides "because I can". And when she was involved in large cases it was never alone. She was a soldier she took action when it was needed, she wasn't an idiot, she just hadn't needed to play this role before. That was a Senior Slayer type

of thing. Buffy and Faith and the original Scoobies.

Where was Giles when she needed him? Or even Andrew, her nerdy Watcher in training.

"Gone." It was a throaty whisper, half choked and extremely raw. It wasn't emotion. She missed her makeshift family but she'd long ago accepted the fact that they *were* gone.

It wasn't emotion, it was the ache in her throat. Dry and shredded raw from her frantic screaming. As though she'd been doing so for hours and maybe she had been because when she opened her eyes they sky was dark.

She could see the glow from the car's headlights in the corner of her vision. It painted the trees above her in an eerie yellow light. It made her eyes hurt just looking at the bright contrast between the pitch black sky and the bright yellow trees.

A burning sensation in the back of her eyes, she could tell it was from her little mind excursion. Whatever it was that just happened, she didn't want to experience it again. Not anytime soon at least.

Veronica could hear music coming from above, along with a stream of curses. She turned her head to look up at where she'd just fell from only to see a figure clumsily making its way down to her.

"No. No. No no no. Don't be dead, please don't be dead." She could hear the guy panicking to himself as he neared her. "Shit! My parents are going to kill me, I'm going to go to jail-" Veronica toyed with the idea of actually playing dead with the guy but decided against it. His voice was getting seriously high with his anxiety.

She cleared her throat a couple of times before she could fully make out the words. "Not dead, dude." She waved a hand at him, still sprawled out in leaves and dirt. Her voice was hoarse.

"What the fuck!?" The guy, a teen actually, stumbled to a stop a few feet away from her head. His white shoes were visible even in the dark. She squinted her eyes as she looked up at him. She wasn't exactly a good judge of height being short herself, and currently in

pain, and in the dark and viewing him upside down, but he was taller than her that was for sure.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!" He leaned over her with his hands on his hips. She couldn't see his face, he was nothing but a black silhouette against the yellow of his headlights, but she could guess that it was most definitely pinched in anger. "I could have killed you! Standing in the middle of the road in the dark! Who does that?!" He tossed his hands up in the air to emphasize his point. The outline of his head shifted, hair probably falling into his eyes.

His voice grated on her nerves. She ached. Body, mind and soul, all just a big ball of ache. She was tired. From the magic, the fall and the stupid fucking Fates that kept fucking with her destiny. She had enough to deal with as it was. She didn't need this random asshole to tell her how stupid she was. She knew how stupid she was acting, better than anyone.

"Oh, *fuck off!*" Her voice came out clear that time.

She could hear him splutter at her words. "*Excuse me?!*" He hadn't expected that response. *Well good.* She hadn't expected to be ran off the road. You get what you give.

Veronica's hands gripped the rough bark of the tree she was against, she used the hold to help pull herself up into a sitting position. Her temples throbbed, but it wasn't going to stop her.

"I said, '*Fuck. Off.*' I'm not the only one at fault here. I was standing in the road, sure, but it's not like I just threw myself into your way all of a sudden. And I was at the top of the hill, you had your headlights on, you should have seen me standing there before you even got close. What were you doing that kept your eyes off the road? Hmm?"

"Pssh! What!? Don't turn this around on me." He waved a hand around to emphasize his words. "I'm not the one who was standing in the middle of the woods like some weirdo!"

"No, you just drove out of the fucking woods like some weirdo. Where the hell did you even come from? There's nothing beyond the lab but woods, I could see that from the top of the hill! Why were

you wandering around the forest in the dark?!"

"I didn't come out of the woods, I was at the quarry. Not that it's any of your business." He was really starting to get frustrated. He threw his hand up with a little groan. "You shouldn't even be out this late. What are you? Like nine? Isn't it past your bedtime?"

She half hugged the tree during his little fit, pulling herself up so that she stood at her full height. Her head swam. Little spots of color littered her vision. Dots of reds, greens and blues rained down across her view but that had nothing to do with her mouth.

"Oh, wow that hurt. 'Past my bedtime?' That was a good one, real original. Why don't you just jump back into your car and crawl back into whatever skirt you've just finished chasing. Bet she wasn't really satisfied with the two minutes she just received."

She could hear him mutter to himself. "What the fuck?"

She let go of her hold on the tree. She was still seeing spots but at least it wasn't getting any worse. She'd be fine. "Now if you'll excuse me, I kind of have some shit to take care of."

Veronica had every intention of marching back up that hill and doing..... *Something*.

She didn't have a plan but she knew she had to do something. That girl in that lab, that Witch, she was in danger. Those people, those *scientists*, were all pieces of shit that were using that girl for something *bad*.

She could feel the hair raise at the back of her neck. That monster in the dark, that demon, was part of the reason why she was here.

And she'd do something about it as soon as she got back up that hill.

She pushed her way past him, which didn't really make the impact she wanted because she was like a foot shorter than him and was barely able to put any force into the action.

She felt him turn with the motion. He called after her as she ascended the hill. "Hey! Watch it!"

Well, she *attempted* to ascend the hill. She'd grabbed onto a root to help her pull herself up the slope and the thing came loose. She could feel herself falling backwards, she prepared to hit the ground again.

Instead she fell into a pair of waiting arms. Before she knew it, she'd been scooped up in a bridal carry and they were already halfway up the climb.

"What are you doing? Put me down! Now." She didn't really fight his hold. She knew she wasn't in the condition to make it up on her own. She'd just had to let her objection be known.

She was just petty like that.

She really didn't enjoy being carried around like some child though. She was physically thirteen, and mentally somewhere between that and seventeen. Maybe. Sort of?

Besides the whole age thing. She was a Slayer. She was supposed to be this super strong, almost indestructible being. Super healing, super reflexes, strength, agility, all of that stuff.

And here she was in the scrawny arms of some random teenager, barely able to walk and definitely magically exhausted.

She was better than that, than *this*. Or at least she had been. She hadn't exactly kept up with any of her training while she'd been off world. There hadn't really been a need before the past month.

That was going to have to change.

She couldn't do anything in the condition she was in. She couldn't break into a government facility. She couldn't slay a demon. She couldn't save anyone.

Not right now.

So she let the teenager carry her without too much of a fight. She let some of the tension and anger that had built up fade from her system

"You're lucky I don't drop you. You're, like, really harsh. And look at me, bruised ego and all, still helping out the little damsel in distress."

How dare he?

Veronica Lehane-Hernandez was no *damsel*.

"I will literally stab you." So the anger hadn't dissipated fully.

"What?!" He laughed out as they finally reached the top. His breath tickled her ear. She swatted at him in retaliation.

"Alright, we're at the top. Put me down already." He set her down none too gently, before making his way to his car. He didn't even look back at her.

His car was parked on the crest of the hill. It took up two lanes as he'd apparently swerved into the other lane in his attempt to avoid hitting her. The driver's side door was open. The radio was still on, Stevie Nicks's Stand Back filtered from the car. His headlights were still on, blinding her yet again.

He didn't immediately get back in the car. He went around the passenger side and picked up her bike. He opened up one of the back doors and began to shove the thing into the back seat.

"What the hell are you doing?" She stumbled over to the hood of his car.

He didn't look back at her, too focused on getting the bike's wheels to stay in a certain position. "I'm driving you home. You can't ride a bike like that. You'll fall right over or really get hit by a car or something. I don't need your death on my hands."

"Yeah, I get that. But be gentle. I bought her myself. Mommy and Daddy didn't pay for my wheels." She couldn't stop the words from slipping past her lips, nor did she try.

She could hear him groan from in the car. She could tell that she was really working him up. It was entertaining. She hadn't had a good banter since the last time she saw Spike and that was *years* ago.

"Yeah well, self bought or not-" He re-emerged from the car and shut the door before the bike tried to spill back out. "-it's still a piece of shit."

He looked back at her with a laugh. "Holy shit! You're bleeding." He gestured at his own face.

"What?" Veronica brought her fingers up to her forehead. Nothing. She slid her hand down the bridge of her nose. Once she reached her upper lip she knew where it was coming from.

Blood was dripping out of both nostrils. She whipped at her mouth with her sleeve. She pulled at the shirt so there was a little bit more material she could ball up around her hand. The shirt shifted around her small frame as she did so.

She pulled the sleeve back from her face. The grey material was now a mix between brown and red. She waved a hand at the teen for a confirmation. She just wanted to know that she wasn't actively leaking blood down her face.

He wasn't looking at her face though. Instead he was staring at the exposed skin of her neck. It wasn't in a creepy way, more like a worried way.

Veronica rolled up her bloody sleeve and brought up that same hand to brush her fingers along her neck. Her fingers brushed across the expanse of scarring she'd received during her first Slayer related hunt.

Thick jagged lines, five parallel to each other, started at the neck and worked their way down and then suddenly jerked sideways once they reached her collarbone. She vividly remembered the pain that the clawed hand had caused, how it almost ripped the skin right off her body. How she'd been able to see bone through the gouges. There were burn marks throughout the wound as well. She'd cauterized the wound with her glowing hands, trying to melt the skin back together in order to stop herself from bleeding out.

It was crude and it hurt like hell. But it saved her life.

The scars were usually hidden by a constant glamour she held, but apparently she'd dropped the spell during the weird mind meld with the girl in the lab.

"Are you okay?" He cleared his throat. She could barely make out his features because the lights were still shone in her direction but she could hear the pity in his voice clear as day.

"I'm five by five." She narrowed her eyes at him. Daring him to object.

"Good. That means 'everything's okay,' right?" He averted his eyes, looking towards the lab in his play at avoiding the ice in her gaze. "I had a Grandpa who fought in the war. He won. Um yeah, so point is he bought me these Walkie-Talkies and he taught me the lingo. 'Over and out,' 'copy,' 'five by five,' all-

He was babbling. She interrupted him. "It happened a long time ago. I'm over it. Let's just get in the car so you can drive me home and this day can finally be over."

"Yeah, let's do that."

Veronica slid her backpack straps off her shoulders and made her way to the passenger seat.

He was already in his seat fiddling with the radio when she closed the door and settled in.

"Oh. It's Steve, by the way. Steve Harrington."

Harrington. How pretentious.

"I *literally* couldn't care less. Just head that way for like five minutes and it'll be the very first house you see."

"Right. Okay." Steve nodded his head once and then they were off.

She just wanted to go to sleep.

They'd been in silence for all of a minute before he spoke again.

"Soo, you're not gonna put on your seatbelt?"

"Oh my Goddess! You're such a fucking dork. Just drive!"

Veronica eventually stumbled out of the car once they got to Marianne's. She left the car without so much as a goodbye. Just dragged her backpack out of the car with her and headed for the door.

She figured Harrington would unload the bike. She didn't wait to watch. Though she did hear him mumble to himself under his breath.

She reached for the knob of the front door and realized she hadn't actually locked the door on her way out before. She then realized she never left Marianne a note either.

The woman was kind but strict. She didn't have many rules and Veronica just broke an important one.

The handle gave way easily. No need for her to dig out her key. The house was dark. No lights, no sounds. Nothing.

She entered the house, leaving the door open, still hearing the teen complaining about not being a butler. She ignored him as she made her way into the kitchen. She flicked on the light and noticed a little folded piece of paper on the center of the island.

Marianne would be gone until Sunday afternoon. Apparently the woman had a client in Illinois that she had to deal with.

Veronica made her way back outside. Clicking on the living room light as she went. She stood on the porch as she watched the boy bring the bike up to the house.

"Are your parents home?" The light from the house illuminated his face. It was the first time that she'd actually seen his face in full. She was able to make out the details now that the only source of light wasn't being shined in her eyes.

Tall, wide shoulders, trim, typical 80s big hair. Brown eyes, straight nose, chiseled jawline. Pretty. But not too pretty. If that made sense.

"Foster parent." She waved the paper around. "And no, but she left a note."

He mumbled something that sounded an awful lot like "well at least you got a note." She twitched a bit but otherwise ignored it. She often heard what she wasn't supposed to hear.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

She wasn't okay. And she knew that *he* knew that. But she wasn't about to admit it out loud.

"Mhmm."

"And you're okay all by yourself?" He stared up at her with intense searching eyes.

Ugh.

She kind of just wanted to yell at him again but she knew he was being serious when he asked. He could have dropped her off and not looked back. Hell, he could have left her there in the woods. He was being kind and she had a feeling it wasn't something he did often. So though it bugged her she answered him honestly. Or as close to honest as she could get.

"I will be." She wasn't okay at the moment. Not in the way he meant. But she would be once she got some sleep and got her shit together. She would be okay again once she had a plan.

But first sleep.

"I'm just going to go to sleep. I'll be fine."

"No more woods?" He crossed his arms in front of his chest. Tucking his hands under his arms as though to warm them. He raised a single brow as he looked at her.

"No more woods. Today." This was all that she could promise.

He rolled his eyes at her words. But she could tell that he knew it was the best he'd get.

"Fine. Just go inside already. It's freezing out. It's past your bedtime." He shooed her towards the door.

Instead of responding to his teasing in kind Veronica thanked him and then promptly shut door before he could respond.

She quickly made her way to her room. She haphazardly undressed and her fingers trembled as she unlaced the knife sheath from her leg.

She usually slept in a t-shirt and shorts combo that she kept in her dresser, but she paused as her hand met the drawer. Her hand was tinted red with her blood and dirt was under her nails. She looked down at her other hand and found it was just as dirty, but her eyes strayed from the grime and settled on her wrist.

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The drop in her glamour had revealed all that she kept hidden. The tattoo was something that she rarely even thought about. Out of sight, out of mind. And she'd kept up an almost constant glamour since she'd landed in the 80s.

She looked into the mirror on her closet door. Saw the dirt on her skin, the leaves in her hair, the blood on her hands. She was bone tired but she needed a shower first.

It was quick. The water was as hot as she could make it. The steam was so thick she could feel it fill her lungs as she breathed. She started with her hair. Watching as little pieces of leaves and dirt washed down the drain. After wringing out the conditioner she allowed herself a single minute to lean against the wall and just let the scalding water flow down her back and drip down her face. She counted the seconds. Then she practically scrubbed her body raw and she was done.

She knew that she really should map out some type of plan or whatever. She could barely keep her eyes open at this point though. It could wait one more day.

She dried off her hair and dressed. She lazily brushed her tresses. She knew the horror it would be in the morning without brushing it.

Veronica fell asleep as soon as her head, still wet, hit the pillow.

Tremors wracked her body as she slept.

She didn't wake up until Sunday afternoon.

—

Hawkins Indiana, September 6th, 1983

"She's been at it for the last two weeks." Lucas pulled the binoculars from his eyes and handed them over to Dustin. The boy had been swatting at Lucas's shoulder for the last few minutes. It was his turn to be lookout.

Will looked up at his two friends as they both spied on Veronica. He wasn't really comfortable with the fact that the Party was stalking her, but he was curious as to what she was doing.

He peaked around the staircase they were all sitting on and out toward the highschool football field. Veronica was just a speck from where they stood. Hence the binoculars.

"I don't get what she's doing though. Last week she was running laps around the field and running up and down the bleachers. I don't know why anyone would do that outside of P.E. but I understood that. Exercise. Physical training. This I don't get." Dustin pulled the binoculars away from his face and waved them in the girl's general direction.

Dustin looked down at Mike and Will, the only two who hadn't looked through the scope that day. "She's just sitting there."

Lucas decided to chime in as well. "And she's been sitting there for the last half hour. Lunch is up in...." He checked the watch on his wrist. "Two minutes. And she hasn't moved from that spot even once."

"Let me see." Mike stood from his spot next to Will and climbed to the top, their designated crow's nest. He kneeled against the railing and held his hand out for the binoculars.

Will watched as his friend studied the girl through the lenses. "I think she's meditating." Mike looked down at Will while passing the binoculars to Lucas. "You said she knew some kind of Karate, right?"

Maybe it has something to do with that."

"Maybe she's training for some type of tournament. She's like the granddaughter of that lawyer on Kerley, or something. That woman is always heading out of town. My mom says she works on retainer for some big company in Chicago. She's always in the city, maybe Veronica used to be a part of a dojo over there." Lucas plopped himself down in Mike's abandoned seat and nudged Will with his elbow before handing the binoculars to him.

Lucas's words did make sense, Mike's too but he felt like they didn't quite fit what was going on. Will looked back at the girl in the field and thought back to what he'd observed of her since they met.

The way she had literally leaped in from out of nowhere on that first day. The way James flinched whenever she so much as entered the same hallway as him. The speed she showed when she ran around the highschool's tack. The way she weaved in and out of the crowds in the halls during breaks, gracefully and quick.

It could be all chalked up to the Karate thing. But it didn't feel right to him. There was more that was going on with her. He just didn't know what.

Yet.

Will turned toward the railing and brought the scopes up to his eyes. He tried to get Veronica in focus but his aim was off. He could make out her hair pulled up into a bun and then her backpack on the grass at her side.

He shifted around and was able to steady his view of her. She was sitting with her legs crossed and her feet tucked in under her knees. Her hands rested on her legs palms up. Her face was blank, eyes closed and expression slack. She looked like she was asleep, really.

She probably was meditating. But he had the strange urge to know why.

"That's boring." Dustin came down to sit on the stair above he and Lucas, Mike followed him.

"How is that boring? How many people do you know besides her that do Karate? How many girls?" Mike began to pack up his backpack, Dustin and Lucas followed.

"What more do you want from her? She's already staving off the mouthbreathers." Lucas stood up and tossed out his trash into a garbage can nearby.

She actually was keeping Troy and James at bay. The worst they'd done in her presence was shoulder Will in passing in the hallway. Will had smacked into a locker but it hadn't hurt too much. The next day James came in with a bruise across his nose and eyes.

Veronica supposedly bashed his face into a locker. He didn't think that was the real story. He was just glad the two bullies were finally leaving he and his friends alone.

Will's things were already tucked into his bag so he continued to watch the girl in the field. The bell would ring in a second, but he was too focused on her face to care.

"I don't know. I was hoping she was like a super secret ninja or something." Will could tell that Dustin was punctuating his words with random punches and kicks but he wasn't paying attention. He was too focused on Veronica. "Kicking ass and standing against the forces of darkness."

The girl's eyes shot open and she whipped her head around so that she was staring right at them. Will jumped back at the sight of her eyes narrowed in his direction. For a second they seemed yellow instead of their normal brown, until she blinked and they were once again dark.

"Forces of darkness? Really?" Lucas stepped in front of the binoculars, blocking Will's view. "She's an eighth grader. Not a Jedi. What is wrong with you?"

Will shot up, binoculars still in hand hoping to catch a glimpse of her again. The others fought behind him.

Will searched the field and she was gone. The bell rang signaling the

end of lunch. He gave the binoculars to Mike, who then tucked them into his backpack.

"What's wrong?" Mike waited for Will as the others had already headed inside.

Will looked at his friend and then back to the empty field. "I don't know yet."

Mike followed his gaze. "Where did she go? I didn't even see her move."

"I have no idea."

Will kept playing that last glimpse of her in his mind. Her yellow eyes.

And Dustin's words.

Standing against the forces of darkness.

For some reason that phrase felt right. Felt a lot better than and more true than anything about a tournament.

Will shook his head to clear his thoughts. He didn't need to be focusing on that at the moment. He had a math test next period.

That's what he should be focused on.